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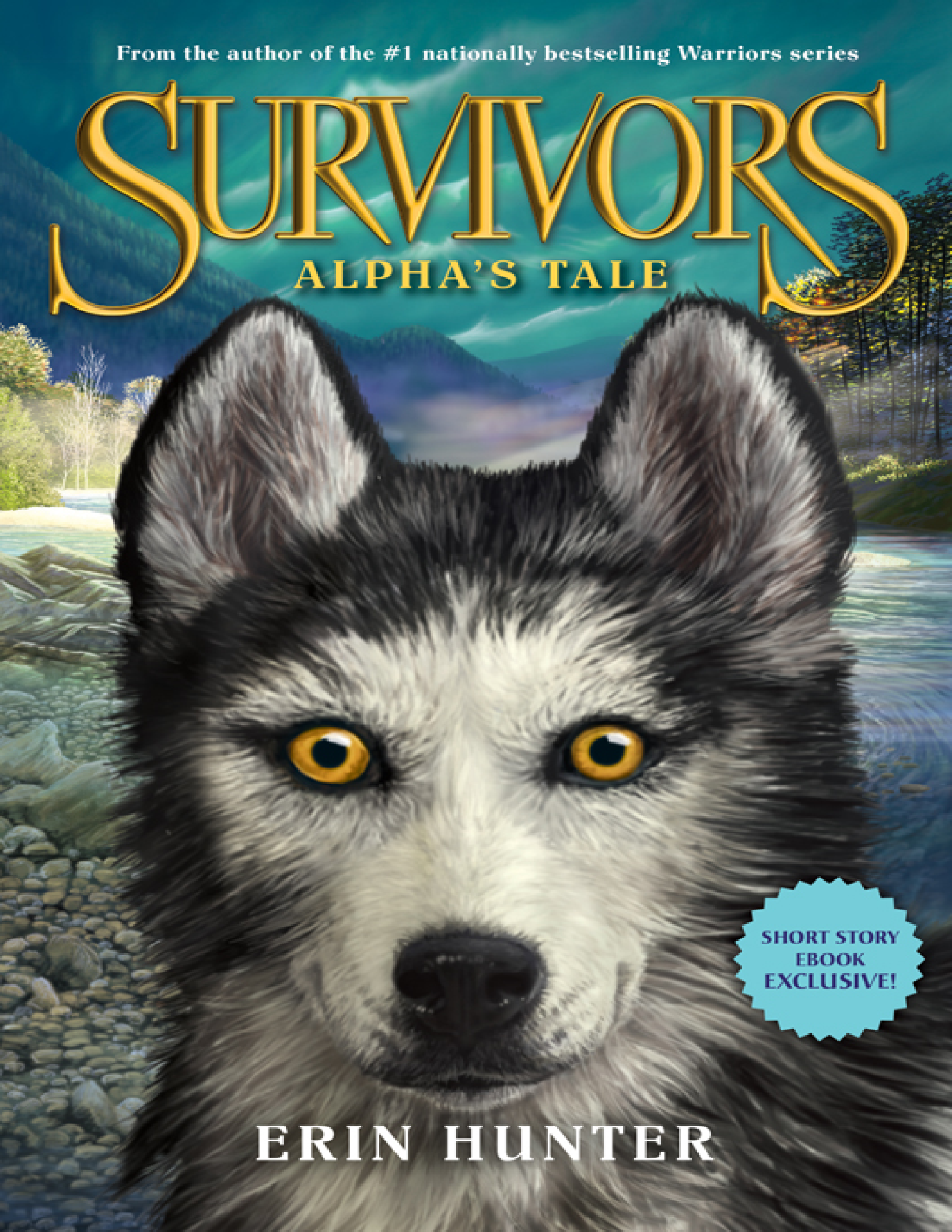
SURVIVORS

ALPHA'S TALE



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ERIN HUNTER

SURVIVORS

ALPHA'S TALE

ERIN
HUNTER

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SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to Gillian Philip

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PACK LIST

THE WOLF PACK (IN ORDER OF RANK)

ALPHA—a powerful female with a pale coat and yellow eyes

BETA—a male with shaggy gray fur

BOLD—a male with light gray fur

FLEET—a smaller male with brown-and-cream fur

NOBLE—a female with brown-and-gray fur

QUICK—a young male with gray fur and yellow eyes (pup of Graceful, half brother to Pup)

WISE—an older male with tawny fur

GRACEFUL—a female with gray fur (mother to Quick and Pup)

BRAVE—a young male with dark gray fur

DARING—a young female with gray-and-cream fur

STRIDENT—a young male with dark gray fur

OMEGA—a frail and ancient female with light gray fur

PUP—a young male with gray-and-white fur and yellow eyes, not yet Named (pup of Graceful, half brother to Quick)

LONGPAW FANGS (IN ORDER OF RANK)

ALPHA—Sundance—a large black-and-brown male

BETA—Zorro—a smaller black-and-tan male

Belle—a black-and-tan female

Calamity—a young black-and-tan female

LONE DOGS

Snail—a male pup with long ears and shaggy brown fur

CHAPTER ONE

If Pup narrowed his yellow eyes against the sun-dazzle on the snow, he could imagine he was stalking a great deer.

He moved through the trees like a shadow, placing his pads carefully so as not to crunch on exposed pine needles. One paw raised, he froze, pricking an ear forward. An icy breeze blew his prey's scent to his nostrils, rippling his mane of fur, which was almost as thick now as an adult wolf's. Pup lowered his muzzle, snuffing silently at the crust of snow. *Soon it'll be a real deer,* he thought, *or even a giantfur. I could take either of them.*

He was close to becoming a full adult of the Pack. Then he would bring down huge prey with his comrades. *This is how I'll stalk. This is how I'll defend us all against the bite of the long cold.* Pup shifted a paw, edging sideways to remain downwind of the creature. *I'll bring many deer to the Pack to fatten our bellies for Ice Wind.*

Red fur flashed again between the pine trunks, a few wolf-strides ahead. *Yes, deer*, he thought hungrily. *And elk and mountain goats and* . . .

The creature he was stalking sat up on its tiny hind legs, sniffing the air for prey of its own.

. . . *Or weasels. Oh well.* Pup breathed a silent sigh. *Keep your mind on the prey at hand, Pup.*

After tonight it would be different. After tonight he would run with the Pack's hunters. After tonight, he would have his Name.

In the dense forest Pup couldn't see the horizon, but he knew where it lay, and he gazed longingly in its direction. That was where the full moon would rise tonight; that was where the Pack would gather and give him his Wolf Name. Impatience and excitement churned in his belly: What would it be? Because *Pup* was nothing. *Pup* was the name given to

all young wolves. His true Name would be given to him for his ferocity, perhaps, or his tracking skills, or the long strides he took as he ran. *Longstride.* He liked that. . . .

But it was not his choice. His Pack would name him, and that was as it should be. He felt his tail lift with pride, and then it slumped back, and he blinked.

The weasel—I lost it!

A growl rumbled in his throat, but he held it there. *You fool! If you're not going to be Pup anymore, stop acting like one.* Determinedly he lowered his muzzle to the ground and paced silently forward, nosing out the sharp tang that would lead him back to his prey.

There! Pup went still again, lowering his shoulders. The weasel was sniffing around a rabbit burrow, mad with hunger itself, and it didn't see him coming. Pup sprang, snapped, and flung the weasel to the ground.

Not quite dead! It twisted, bared tiny teeth, and bit wildly at his swiping paw, but this time Pup had it. He seized its thin wriggling spine and crunched, feeling it go limp in his jaws.

You should have been a deer. Next time . . .

Pup trotted back up the slope to where the trees thinned out and the snow was deeper. A gray wolf sat there, gazing down at him and holding the corpse of a white rabbit beneath one powerful paw.

"Mother-Wolf." Pup dropped the weasel respectfully before her, and licked her face in greeting.

"Pup. I watched you." His Mother-Wolf, Graceful, caressed his jaw in return. "You're a fine hunter already. But you need to concentrate." She sounded amused rather than angry.

"I know. I was thinking too much about the moon."

"That's not surprising." Graceful's voice was soft and full of affection as they turned together and carried their prey back toward the Pack-den. "I can't believe you've grown so fast, and so strong. Tonight will be the finest in your young life, Pup, and I already know you'll make me proud." She

hesitated, glancing back toward the pine forest, and her voice grew quieter. “I know your father would be proud, too. I wish he could be here to witness your Naming Ceremony. I wish your littermates could be here.”

Pup felt the old twist of sadness in his belly, but it was muted now. He’d never known his littermates, after all: Too weak to survive, they had died within weeks of their birth. He’d been the strong one. Sometimes he wondered, with a vague longing, how it would have been to grow up in the rough-and-tumble of a big wolf family, with brothers and sisters around him, and a wolf-sire to watch as they learned to play and hunt and fight together.

No. Even if his siblings had lived, there would have been no wolf family, at least not a real one. His father, after all, was no wolf.

Pup nuzzled Graceful as they walked. He wished his Mother-Wolf could be less sad; talking of her lost pups and mate always made her melancholy. She shouldn’t think about them—not tonight. Pup was proud, anyway, of his own survival, the sturdy determination that had seen him through. He and Graceful were the family that mattered: the two of them and—of course—the Pack.

The others were resting together in the low golden light of sunset as he and Graceful padded back into their sandstone-walled valley. Wolves sprawled on rocks, soaking up the last of the sun’s rays, or play-fought in pairs, or nibbled fleas and ticks from one another’s shaggy coats. Some rose to greet Graceful with a lick and a soft whine; many of them didn’t. No wolf took any notice of Pup, but he didn’t mind. He was used to that. After tonight, he knew, it would be different.

“You take them both to the prey-store,” Graceful said, dropping her rabbit and nudging Pup with her nose. “Let them see you contributing your prey to the Pack.” Pup gave a whine of happiness and carried both her rabbit and his own weasel to the prey-store, in a small dark cavern

beneath the rocks. There was a fine haul there already; hunting had been good, and the Pack would share tonight as they always did.

He was backing out of the shadowy overhang when he heard voices above him. A slab of sandstone jutted out there, catching the last sun, and two older wolves lay on it, gossiping lazily.

“Should be a good Howl tonight,” growled one. Bold, Pup realized, recognizing his voice.

“No clouds. The moon will be bright,” agreed the other, Fleet. “The Great Wolf will hear our Howl and answer us.”

“Pity, in a way,” yawned Bold. “The last Howl wasn’t such a perfect night, when Strident and Daring got their names. And tonight it’s that half-breed runt’s turn.”

Pup went still, his blood running cold in his veins.

“Oh, it hardly matters,” said Fleet. “Whatever Name he gets, it won’t be of any consequence. He’ll be Omega soon enough.”

“True.” Bold gave a rumbling grunt. “How did a wolf like Graceful take up with a filthy dog, anyway?” he muttered. “No wonder most of the pups died.”

Pup felt his heart shrink inside him. He crept from the prey-store, his flanks pressed close to the rock wall until he was safely out of sight of the two elders. He knew what the Pack thought of him; he should be used to it. Yet each time he overheard their snide remarks, it was as if the Great Wolf had drawn a sharp claw across his belly.

If it was just him, he wouldn’t mind so much, but Graceful . . .

She was sitting alone as usual, he saw, as he looked across the small valley. Self-possessed as she was, he knew she must be lonely. His Mother-Wolf never had been forgiven for taking a dog as her mate, and for giving him pups. Would things have been different, Pup wondered, if his father had lived? Would they treat Graceful with more

respect? Would they even, perhaps, have accepted her half-blood offspring more easily?

Probably not. He sighed, still eyeing Graceful, and padded on. He was jolted out of his reverie when something collided with his shoulder.

“Watch it!” a young wolf snapped, her fangs grazing his neck.

Pup started. He’d walked right into a small gang of his Packmates, and he’d accidentally shouldered Daring, of all wolves. She had a vicious temper at the best of times.

“Sorry—” he began.

“So you should be, runt.” Strident curled his muzzle and growled. “Why can’t you look where you’re going?”

“It was an accident,” snarled Pup. “Now let me through.”

“Ha.” Daring hunched her shoulders and stalked around him, stiff-legged. “You don’t tell us what to do, runt.”

It was too much. Her contempt, and Bold’s overheard scorn, made anger flare in Pup’s gut. His hackles sprang erect and he faced Daring full on, his lips peeled back and his own teeth showing.

“Back down, runt.” Daring barked a laugh. “You can’t challenge me when you don’t even have a Name.”

“Back down yourself,” he snarled. “That works both ways.” Challenges were only permitted between fully grown wolves—not that he was afraid of Daring. She was only a few moons older than he was. If she wanted to ignore the rules, he was more than willing to fight.

“You lot!” The angry yelp made the young wolves turn as one.

Beta was watching them, his eyes cold and hard. Daring shrank back under his stare.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Beta snarled. “Daring, see to Alpha’s bedding. Strident, Fleet wants a young wolf to take a message. Get out of my sight! And the rest of you. Go!” As the wolves bounded hastily away, he snapped, “Not you, Pup.”

Pup couldn’t help crouching lower as Beta glared at him. For long moments the Pack’s second in command was silent; then he curled his muzzle back from his teeth.

“After moonrise tonight,” he growled, “you can be beaten in any challenge you choose. But not before. Do I make myself clear?”

Pup dipped his head, but this time it was as much to hide his anger as to show submission. So even his Beta thought he was destined for nothing better than Omega status?

I’ll show them all, Pup thought grimly. *I’ll prove my blood runs as fierce and strong as any of theirs.*

As soon as he had his Name, he’d challenge Daring—and he’d thrash her, in fair combat. And then? He’d fight his way up the hierarchy, one wolf at a time. He’d climb the ranks till nobody dared treat him—or his Mother-Wolf—with disrespect.

I’ll never be any wolf’s Omega. Pup looked to the place where the moon would rise, and swore it to the Great Wolf himself.

Never.

CHAPTER TWO

Pup's gnawing anger stayed with him all the way to the den he shared with Graceful, but as soon as he slunk into its familiar warmth, his spirits lightened.

"Hello, Quick," he growled.

His half brother cocked his head and gave him his usual sardonic wolf grin. "Hey, Pup. Soon to be Not-Pup."

Most of Graceful's first litter thought Pup was as far beneath them as the river in the canyon. Pup knew they had never forgiven her for taking another mate—a *dog!*—after their own father was killed in a battle with the Far-Cliff Pack. Quick was different, though. He still came to visit Graceful and he didn't wear a permanent sneer around her lone half-blood offspring.

What was more, thought Pup, he was fun to be around. Quick was named as much for his wit as for his speed in the chase. His remarks could be a bit too smart, but at least he wasn't mean or scornful.

Quick let his tongue hang out. "Now that you're going to get your Name, you can start sending your enemies to the Great Wolf's caverns. Who's going to be first, Pup?"

"Daring," growled Pup, his hackles rising.

"He won't be sending any wolf," said Graceful calmly, licking at a paw. "That's not the point of a Name, Quick. Behave yourself."

"If I behaved myself, Mother-Wolf, I'd never have any fun." Quick nibbled the tip of her ear affectionately. "Hadn't we better get going? There's a fat deer leg I've got my eye on, and I don't want to miss it."

That was Quick, thought Pup: always thinking about his belly. But his half brother was as patient as any of the Pack when the wolves gathered later that evening to share the prey. No wolf would dare eat out of turn, not under the keen

eye of Alpha. A powerful pale-coated wolf, she lay on a high slab of rock, holding a haunch of elk down with one huge paw as she gnawed, one yellow eye always on her Pack.

Particularly, tonight, on Pup.

Only when the Pack had eaten and the moon had risen, swollen and silver and high above the tree-spiked horizon, did the wolves gather for the Howl. Pup loved these moments beneath the night sky, when the Great Wolf ran through their dreams, but tonight he found it hard to concentrate. His belly was tight with nerves; the prey was plentiful, but he'd barely been able to gulp down half a rabbit. Perhaps that was why, as wolf voices swelled around him and melded into one great cry, his howl did not seem to quite fit with the others'.

Pup shook himself and tried again, striving to match his pitch to Quick's beside him. His voice was never as strong and as pure as the other wolves', but that was only because of his youth. Wasn't it?

He'd heard the others talk sometimes of how, during the Howl, they would feel the Great Wolf lope down from the stars to walk among them. How she would listen, and answer, and give help to wolves she favored, wolves who had the courage to ask it of her.

Pup squeezed his eyes tight shut. *Great Wolf,* he thought, *give me your blessing. Make me a true Wolf. Make me a part of this Pack.*

However hard he thought it, however loud he howled, he heard no reply. Inside his skull there was only the echo of his own cry. Blinking one eye open, Pup risked a look around the Pack. Their uplifted faces were fierce and joyful, as if every one of them had the Great Wolf howling at their side.

He did not have time to crush down the jealousy that rose in his throat. As the Howl died around him, Alpha gave a ringing bark.

"Come forward, Pup, son of Graceful."

His legs trembled as he rose and paced to the center of the circle. Yellow eyes followed his every move. *I mustn't look afraid.*

"You have come of age, Pup, and now you join our Pack as a true wolf." With a few sharp rips of her fangs and claws, Alpha tore open the belly of Graceful's white rabbit, then flayed it of its skin. Laying her paw on the bloody white pelt, she waited till Pup came forward to sit on it. Then she raised her head again.

"Wolves of my Pack. Name this Pup for his qualities."

Pup swallowed hard. He'd seen this ceremony many times now, and a thrill always ran through his spine when the wolves called out the names they thought would fit the candidate. Sometimes they quarreled over which was best; sometimes a name just seemed to slide over a wolf like a second pelt, and then it was easy and fast. *What will they suggest for me?*

He waited in the silence. No wolf spoke.

Pup swallowed again. He looked around the Pack, desperate to hear a name called, *any* name. Still there was no sound but the gentle sigh of the wind in the pines.

His blood ran hot, then icy cold. *Please . . . one of you . . . name me.*

His eye caught Graceful's. There was shock in her expression. She turned her head to stare at each wolf. Wolf-mothers and sires were not permitted to name their own pups, so she could say nothing herself, but she looked devastated that no other wolf would speak up.

Just when Pup thought the silence might stretch till it snapped, he saw Graceful nudge Quick, hard, with her shoulder. His half brother blinked in surprise, and his friends around him shot him mocking, expectant looks.

Quick. Please, say something. Please.

The young wolf's jaws opened, and he licked his lips, glancing from left to right. He seemed surprised that it had fallen to him.

Quick, you know me! Pup's heart lifted, and the shame of the crushing silence began to slip away. Quick would think of something fine; Quick knew he was a good hunter, that he was strong and fast and brave. Quick would come to his rescue, and then this would be over . . .

Quick drew in a breath, licked his chops again, and gave a sharp, laughing bark.

"DOG."

For an instant the scene seemed to freeze before Pup's eyes. Then the howls rose around him again, but this time they were howls of laughter. Daring was yelping with helpless hilarity, and one of Quick's friends rolled onto his back, unable to contain his hysteria. Even the older wolves were barking with amusement.

"*Dog!*"

"Quick, you devil wolf, that's perfect!"

"Yes! His name is Dog!"

"Quick has spoken!"

"Dog! Dog! Dog!"

Pup suddenly felt life return to his paws, in a wave of helpless anger. He spun on the pelt and faced Alpha.

"Alpha, no! *I am no dog.*"

Slowly, the magnificent she-wolf shook her head. As the howls of laughter began to subside, she gazed at Pup, her yellow eyes unreadable.

"The Pack has spoken," she said. "You are Dog now."

Pup sat motionless on the white pelt, his muscles rigid with the effort of not trembling, as the Pack began to disperse around him. He could still hear their muttering voices, their strangled yelps of amusement.

"Dog!"

"He's called Dog. . . ."

"Was ever a Name more fitting?"

The white rabbit fur beneath him, gleaming in the moonlight, seemed like a stupid practical joke. Glancing

down, Pup could see its empty eye sockets, and even those seemed to mock him.

Dog! Ha! I died so they could call you Dog!

Pup slammed his paw down onto the head of the fur, ripping it with his claws. Then he jerked his head high again.

Quick was still sitting there, next to Graceful, whose face was taut with pain and shame. Pup—*no, I'm Dog now, thanks to him*—bounded across to his half brother, drawing his lips back from his fangs and glaring into his eyes, nose-to-nose. Quick flinched just a little, surprised.

"How could you?" snarled Dog. "You're my brother. How could you *betray me*?"

"Betray you? What?" Quick's eyes opened wide and he took a hasty pace back. "Look, calm down, Pu—Dog. I said the first thing that came into my head. That's what you're supposed to do."

"You called me Dog! I have to carry that Name till I go to the Great Wolf!"

"Sky-Pack help us, it's just a Name! Somebody had to say something." Quick hunched his shoulders. "Anyway, it's true. I'm not your brother; can't be. You're not a real wolf. Your father wasn't a wolf *at all.*"

Dog felt as if the air had been struck from his lungs. Graceful gave Quick a sidelong look, one full of hurt, and turned back to Dog.

"You have a Name now," she said quietly. "And there's no shame in it." Turning on her haunches, she paced away, her head and tail low.

"Does nothing matter to you?" growled Dog, his saliva spattering Quick's jaw. "Does no *wolf* matter?"

Quick's face hardened and he shook himself. "I care about food and my friends and my Pack. I gave you a Name, didn't I? You should be grateful somebody spoke up. Don't take yourself so seriously." With a flick of his bushy tail, Quick bounded away to rejoin the other young wolves.

Dog stood for long moments in the silver moonlight. It no longer shone on the rabbit pelt, which lay there discarded and crumpled and dirty gray.

One thing was certain, Dog realized. The ceremony had done its job. He was no longer a pup; he'd become an adult in the space of an agonizing heartbeat.

I'm more a grown wolf than Quick. I feel a hundred moons older than him. Dog's muzzle curled.

I'm right: Quick cares about nothing and no wolf. He felt like he was seeing his half brother clearly for the first time. Quick was a joker: funny and lighthearted, fast mouthed and empty headed. Consequences never entered his skull.

Dog was an adult wolf now. He was a full member of this Pack, and that meant he'd be on patrol duty this very night. He was at the bottom of the heap, ranking above only the frail, ancient Omega, but that would not be for long.

I'll watch over the Pack that despises me, he thought. *I'll protect them because it's my duty, and I respect my Pack despite everything.*

And he would claw his way up over their heads, biting the grins off their faces as he went. He'd show them what a Dog could do. He'd prove to them, with his claws and his teeth and his guts, what a Dog could *be.*

CHAPTER THREE

The snows melted from the pine branches and from the ground beneath the Pack's paws, thawing into a warm and fertile Long Light: months when their bellies were full, their coats were sleek, and new pups rolled and squealed in the green grass. Then the trees turned red and gold, and once more the ground froze underpaw, and the snows came again, smothering the landscape in white. But the Pack was strong and the wolves endured the cold well.

Only the weakest of the wolves died that Ice Wind, and Dog was one of the strongest. By the time Long Light warmed the land once more, bringing greenness and wildflowers and the migrating herds, he was a fully grown, powerful wolf; by Red Leaf he was the leader of his own hunting team.

The sun striped his back fur with warm gold as he prowled through the undergrowth, scenting for the mule deer he knew had passed this way. He flicked his ears to scatter the flies that danced around his head, but it was impossible to discourage them. Ignoring their insistent high-pitched whining, he focused all his senses on his prey and on his team.

Off to his left, Noble stalked through the scrub. She'd played with his Mother-Wolf as a pup, and she had plenty of experience and skill. Several wolf-strides from his right flank were Daring and Brave, spread out as he'd instructed. Brave was young, but he was keen. Daring was . . . well, she was as she'd always been, but at least she was a reliable hunter.

Dog paused on the edge of the forest clearing. The buck's head was up, sniffing the wind, but it was blowing toward the wolves. It had a group of four or five does as well as some calves that must have been born in an earlier season; the filtered sun burnished their sleek coats with

orange. Any one of them would make a fine catch. *There are four of us*, thought Dog with a surge of hunting-thrill. *How many can we take?*

He flicked an ear toward Noble and glanced at the buck. Turning to Daring and Brave, he indicated the does. Noble gave him a brief nod, but Daring whispered something to Brave, and Dog's brow furrowed.

Dog lowered his forequarters and slunk closer. Their positions were perfect—

There was a crashing of undergrowth to his right as Daring and Brave charged across him toward the buck. It spun in alarm, and the does and the calves bolted for the deeper forest, tails flashing white.

The buck was trying to flee, too, but Daring's claws were already raking its red haunches. With a bellow it turned, lashing its antlers at the two wolves. Dog dashed to help them, even as fury burned in his gut.

I am the leader of this team! What did those two think they were doing? He'd beaten them both—and soundly—to rise above them in the Pack hierarchy, just as he'd challenged and thrashed so many other wolves. He'd left that scar on Daring's shoulder himself!

"Get after those does!" he barked at Noble. "You might still get a calf."

She gave a quick nod and tore into the woods after the deer, but Dog held out little hope; the prey had too much of a head start. Daring and Brave were lunging at the buck's flanks, and Brave even snapped at its head, but that was a bad move—the buck swung its antlers, nearly goring his belly. Daring slashed her claws down its shoulder and Dog leaped to rake its haunches. The creature was still kicking and struggling as Dog grabbed the soft underside of its neck in his jaws. By the time Noble returned, preyless, the stag was on its knees, exhausted from blood loss, and all she had to do was help them finish it off.

As soon as the light died in the buck’s eyes and its head flopped to the earth, Dog sprang back, barking furiously at Daring and Brave. “How dare you ignore my orders?”

Daring hunched her shoulders, giving him a sly look. “You told us to attack the buck, didn’t you?”

“I told you to go for the does, and you know it!” he snarled. “We could have had two of these deer!”

“We only got this one,” she growled, “thanks to me and Brave.”

“Really?” He was breathing heavily, and he fought to control his temper. “Since it’s your kill, then, you can drag it back to camp. Both of you!”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Daring sat back on her haunches and scratched her ear. “Longpaws use dogs for fetching and carrying, so that’s your job. Go on, *fetch*!”

The insolence almost knocked the breath from Dog’s lungs. He drew himself up, his long legs stiff, his eyes blazing. “*I challenge you.*”

The wolves faced each other for a long, silent moment. Daring got to her paws, but Noble took a sidelong step between them.

“Dog,” she said gently, “you’re already Daring’s superior. You’ve nothing to *gain*, and everything to lose.”

“This isn’t about gaining or losing,” snarled Dog. “This is about honor. She’s not going to get away with that talk. She’ll accept my challenge, or I’ll make sure she’s branded a coward.”

He glared into Daring’s eyes, glad to see that she blinked first. Of course Daring knew that she would lose to Dog in any fair fight. He’d proved that before, and with ease. Her ears betrayed her with a nervous twitch.

Brave’s voice cut into the tension between them. “What challenge? I didn’t hear any challenge.”

Dog turned to him, his lip curling. “What?”

“No wolf’s issued a challenge.” Brave tilted his head, and his jaw twisted in a smirk.

“That’s right.” Daring, her composure back, gave a yelp of amusement. “No challenge here.”

“It’s our word against yours,” sniped Brave.

“And who’s going to take a dog’s word over a wolf’s?” Daring growled. “Let’s ask the Pack when we get back, shall we?”

Dog’s hackles sprang erect as he stared at them both in disbelief. Swinging his head, he looked at Noble. She was staring at the ground, apparently fascinated by the carpet of pine needles. With a bark of laughter, Daring turned and stalked away, Brave at her heels.

“Don’t forget the buck,” she called back, her voice brimming with insolence, and then the two young wolves were gone.

Dog shivered with rage beneath his fur. His blood ran hot, and his bones trembled, but there was nothing he could do. He turned to the corpse of the buck and snapped his teeth into its throat.

“I’ll help.” Noble’s small voice was at his ear, and her teeth gripped the buck’s shoulder.

Dog released his grip. “Leave it!” he snarled, twisting to glare at her. “I’m the dog. I’ll carry the prey.”

“You know that isn’t—”

“Noble? They called you *Noble*? That’s a joke,” he growled. “You heard what I said, and what they said, and you kept your jaws shut. *Noble,* hah!”

The older wolf took a pace back, lowering her head. Then she lifted it, and looked sorrowfully into his angry eyes.

“A Name isn’t everything, Dog,” she said softly. “You of all wolves should know that.”

She turned and padded slowly back toward the camp.

The anger wouldn’t shift from his belly. Dog lay in his den, tearing with his fangs at a stout branch pinned beneath his paws. It splintered, spiking into his gums, but he ripped again, furiously, shredding it. The pain was nothing to his

churning fury. He had dragged the buck all the way back to the camp by himself. Beta had been disappointed in them for only catching one deer, and Dog knew Beta was right.

“Dog?” said a soft voice behind him.

He glanced sideways, but sank his teeth into the wood again, wrenching it to splinters. *This should be Daring’s guts.* “Mother-Wolf,” he growled.

“Noble spoke to me. She told me what happened.”

“And?” He spat shreds of branch.

“You have to tell Alpha. You *must.* Alpha would want to know about this kind of insubordination. A Pack can’t afford to let wolves behave like that. Alpha knows it, she’ll take your side, and she’ll—”

“That’s enough!” Dog sprang to his paws, slamming one of them onto what was left of the wood. “Alpha will hear nothing of this, do you hear me?”

“But Dog—”

“I was the senior hunter!” Dog shoved his muzzle against Graceful’s, and spoke through his clenched fangs. “They were my team, under my command! If Daring thinks she can speak to me that way, it is *my fault.*”

“It was not your fault!” Graceful took a pace back, her gentle eyes wide. “I could explain to Alpha. I could tell her what happened. Dog, this is important—”

“Important? To let every wolf in the Pack know what a pathetic leader I am?” He gave a vicious snarl. “I don’t need my Mother-Wolf running to Alpha to tell her all the other wolves are being *mean* to me!”

Graceful’s forequarters sagged. “I only want to help.”

“Help?” he howled. “You’ve done enough!”

Graceful caught her breath, and her brow furrowed with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“What went through your head? Go on, tell me!” Dog raked his claws furiously through the soft floor of the cave, drawing a score like a wound. “Didn’t you even think twice before you inflicted this on your own pup? What kind of

madness got into your brain? You're a wolf, and you mated with a filthy *dog*!"

Graceful stared at him, shaking her head as she backed away, and pain knotted his belly at the expression on her face. For an instant, the anger inside him died, like a forest fire swamped by rain.

She set her jaw, her eyes dark with hurt. "Dog, don't. Don't talk about your sire that way!"

Dog gathered his anger. "You're the one who made him my sire. Not me!"

Fury lit her eyes, and they flashed gold in the dimness. "Don't you dare! Your sire was a fine dog, a strong and a wise dog. Yes, he was a dog, and he was better than a hundred wolves I've known! You should be proud to wear that Name, yet all you can do is listen to vicious fools like Daring. Well, I don't have to. And I don't have to listen to you insult your sire!"

Turning on her haunches, she bounded from the den. Dog stared after her, his insides twisting and tightening with conflicted fury. *How could I* . . .

Graceful's right.

But I'm right too! I can't live like this.

She should never have made me!

With a howl of intolerable fury, he tore the remains of the branch to shreds.

CHAPTER FOUR

The plenty of Long Light never lasted forever, and the longpaws came as the trees turned golden. The deer grew warier even as they dwindled in number, because the longpaws hunted with a ruthless efficiency. Dog had watched them once, from a dense copse of sagebrush, and they had no need to harry a buck, to dodge its antlers and claw at its flanks till the blood ran out of it. They raised strange weapons to their shoulders, loud stick-shaped weapons that spat death, and the deer died without a struggle.

And so the deer were moving on. Yesterday's find had been lucky, too lucky to waste as Daring and Brave had. The wolves were being forced to travel much farther than usual from their snug and secure valley. Although it meant hunger nipped more insistently at their bellies, Dog was glad of the scarcity in one way: It made him even more important to the Pack. His hunting skills were needed like never before.

The morning after Dog's argument with Graceful, they headed down the flank of a narrow valley. Dog was not the leader; his half brother Quick was the one in charge of this team. Brave was loping through the aspens above him, but Daring wasn't with them this time, and Dog was grateful. Here on the far edge of their territory every one of the hunters was uneasy. No wolf wanted a huntingmate they couldn't trust.

The land was much flatter than it was near camp, and looked to Dog as if it had been beaten into submission by the longpaws. Neatly planted corn and grassland extended as far as he could see, hemmed in by longpaws' fences. Sharp, unfamiliar scents stung his nostrils, and he felt horribly on edge. This, he couldn't help thinking, was no place for wolves.

It didn’t seem to deter Quick. His brother was digging hard with his claws beneath one of the wooden fences, making a hole big enough for a wolf to wriggle through. Dog could understand that, though, because the scents beyond the fence were far more enticing than any plant smell. The teasing odor in his nostrils was almost like deer, but different. It smelled heavy and warm and meaty and *slow*. One after another, the wolves followed Quick beneath the fence.

“To me, hunters,” growled Quick, very quietly, and they gathered around him, forequarters low and hackles high. “Listen. There’s easy prey here, but we have to move in and out fast. The longpaw keeps sheep, and they’re guarded only by one old dog, but the longpaw himself has a loudstick.”

Shivers of apprehension ran through the hides of the hunters. “Those can kill at a distance,” said Dog. “I’ve seen them.”

“And that’s why we have to be fast.” Quick turned and trotted with long paces into the field, jerking his head to position the other hunters.

Dog was only a few strides from Quick’s left flank, and he obeyed his leader—*as any wolf should,* he thought grimly—but the closer they came to the sheep, the greater the uneasiness in his belly. As Quick slowed his pace and flared his nostrils, stalking closer to the oblivious, fluffy white creatures, Dog halted and growled.

“I smell something else, Quick.”

“A longpaw? The sheepdog?” Quick’s fangs were bared as he licked his chops hungrily. “We’ll get out faster if you’re quiet.”

“It’s neither. It’s like . . . other wolves,” insisted Dog. “Can’t you smell them?”

“No! I said, *quiet.* Now!” Quick launched himself at the nearest sheep.

The creature was hopelessly slow and clumsy, its thin legs stumbling beneath its stocky, fleecy body as it bellowed and tried to run. The whole flock began running now, awkwardly and all in one direction.

“This will be easy,” barked Quick, snapping at the sheep’s neck. “They all stay together. Get another one, Brave!”

It did seem easy, thought Dog as he sprinted to help Quick. *Too easy.* The panicked bellowing of the sheep was almost deafening as they clustered and milled, making useless dashes for escape. The hunters were all around them now, stalking and snarling, snapping at the two fattest to cut them off from their companions.

But despite the noise, Dog could hear something else. The pounding of powerful paws, the low, threatening snarls of a creature to be feared—

“Fierce Dogs!” Brave gave a bark of horror, spinning on his haunches.

Dog released his jawful of fleece and turned to face the newcomers. There were four of them. *So much for Quick’s “one old dog”!*

“Brave’s right,” barked Wise. “Fierce Dogs! They’re Longpaw Fangs!”

Strong and sleek, their black-and-brown hides burnished and their ears trimmed to sharp, erect points, the Fierce Dogs seemed to be all white savage teeth as they raced across the field.

“*Fangs?*” barked Dog, aghast.

“Longpaw Fangs! The longpaws use them as weapons.” Wise was backing off, the sheep abandoned, but it was already too late. The Fierce Dogs were on them, cutting the wolves off from the sheep flock as easily and skilfully as the wolves had separated the sheep.

Dog backed away as one of the Fierce Dogs launched itself at him, and he rolled onto his flank in a desperate effort to dodge its ferocious teeth. Its comrades were a blur

of polished black and brown fur, their claws and jaws raking and tearing through the wolves. For all the wolves' discipline and teamwork, they were scattering and panicking before the onslaught.

The Fierce Dogs seemed to know exactly how to divide the hunting party, shattering all the wolves' attempts to form a defensive line. Quick rolled and lunged for a Fierce Dog's belly, but the creature dodged with slick efficiency and lashed out a savage paw, sending him tumbling away from the other wolves. Dog couldn't even go to his half brother's aid; he was faced down by a snarling dog too big for him to pass, its paws planted determinedly on the grass. Its lips curled back right to the gums, displaying terrifyingly long teeth, and it was stalking forward with death in its glinting eyes. Somewhere to his left he could hear Brave's high panicked barks as a Fierce Dog drove him back.

"Retreat!" barked Quick. "Retreat!"

Dog needed no second telling. *This was a mistake!* With a last snarl at the attacking Fierce Dog, he backed and spun, lowering his tail to flee.

Brave and the others were running too, tails tucked between their legs, but Dog suddenly skidded to a stop, snapping his head back. "Where's Quick?"

The others didn't even pause to listen. Brave was already scrabbling back under the fence and Wise had simply leaped the fence in his panic, crashing against the top rail but catching it with his forepaws as he fell back, then scrambling desperately over.

Dog turned, his tail quivering. The Fierce Dogs weren't giving chase. Ignoring the fleeing hunters, they were hunched over a gray figure on the meadow, snapping and tearing.

Dog felt his shoulders stiffen. *Quick!*

He could see blood spattering as the Fierce Dogs tore at his half brother, all their attention on him now that the other wolves had fled in disarray. *They'll rip out his throat!*

Dog bunched his muscles and sprang into a run, back toward Quick. His paws pounded across the level meadow and he didn’t even take a breath to bark, so when he slammed into the nearest Fierce Dog, it was taken completely by surprise. It tumbled and he rolled with it, snarling and biting. The others jerked back from Quick, stunned.

Quick’s legs flailed as he fought his way back onto all fours, panting, bleeding from deep scratches. There was a light of terror in his eyes.

“Run, Quick!” barked Dog, just as the first Fierce Dog recovered, sprang upright and flung itself at him.

Quick needed no second telling. Bushy tail pinned tightly between his hindquarters, he fled toward the fence. As Dog made to follow, he heard the snarling breath of the Fierce Dogs behind him. They were all focusing on him now, and he felt claws rake his haunches.

Dog staggered. He swerved, recovering, and veered back toward the fence, but the Fierce Dogs were even more organized than he’d expected. Two of them were coming at him on each flank now. Desperation gave him a burst of speed, and he caught Quick’s yellow eyes, staring from the other side of the fence. *Quick made it, at least he made it out—*

“Dog, *faster*!” His brother’s howl rang in his ears and gave him extra strength, but an instant later it was drowned out by a distant *bang.*

Dog’s paws slid sideways as fear clenched his heart. *That was a loudstick!*

The other wolves knew it, too. They were all running away from the fence now, even Quick, dashing for the trees and for safety.

Wait for me, wait!

A massive blow struck him. One of the flanking Fierce Dogs had barreled into him, and he was flung sideways, his balance lost altogether. An instant later he crashed to the

ground, landing awkwardly on his flank, and he felt a blinding pain in his skull. A Fierce Dog plunged onto him, fangs bared, holding him down with its big, heavy paws.

He lay, stunned, waiting for the killing bite, but it didn’t come. The world had blurred, and the smells of the air and the meadow made no sense. Even the birdsong sounded distorted, and the panting breaths of the Fierce Dogs as they sniffed at him, and the scratch of their claws on the earth.

“Is it wolf or dog?” The voice sounded distant and echoing, even though he felt the hot breath of the dog against his ear.

“He smells like both.” The second growl was harsh and rasping. “We should kill him, then.”

“No.” That was a third voice, one that sounded crisper than the others, and more commanding. “Wait for the Rancher.”

The Rancher. A longpaw.

Terror rippled down Dog’s spine, but not even that could make his muscles work. Blackness rushed up on him in a great tide, and he could only lie there limp on the grass as it swallowed him.

CHAPTER FIVE

The light hurt his eyes. Dog thought bright hot sunshine was streaming onto him, and for a moment, his head full of fog and pain, he didn't understand. *Am I outside my den? Why?*

He blinked; even that small movement hurt. Slowly his eyes adjusted, and he realized the light wasn't so bright after all. It was dim, in fact—sunlight filtered through cracks in wood.

Wood. Not stone. I'm not in my den.

He lay on his side, sprawled on something scratchy, but he wasn't cold. His nose twitched, finding dry dust that made him sneeze. That hurt, too. Managing to lift his head just a little, he saw that there was straw beneath him; it prickled through his fur and caught between his paw pads.

Dog's nostrils flared again, reaching beyond the dusty straw, and his hackles lifted. The scents were strange. There weren't the usual Pack smells of familiar wolves, milk-warm pups, and last night's prey. He couldn't smell sagebrush or juniper or pine resin, only the overwhelming stink of horse and sheep hide, metal, and sawn wood. And worst of all, longpaw. His nostrils were full of the stench: longpaw sweat and skin and fur, and other sickening odors that were altogether strange.

As he twitched his muscles and stretched his limbs, he discovered that he wasn't badly hurt. *Time to go, Dog. Get out of here.*

He rolled onto his belly, crouched flat, and pricked his ears as he glanced around.

He could focus again, his vision clear and sharp. He lay in some kind of longpaw den, full of straw and the odors of strange animals, but a square of light glowed at the far end of it. That was his way out, then. There was a low wooden fence in his way, but that could be leaped. Beyond the

opening in the den, Dog could see a hazy blue line of hills in the distance, jagged with trees. Yearning swept through him, a ferocious need to be running free with his Pack.

Dog hunched his shoulders, set his jaw, and sprang for freedom.

Something around his throat jerked him back in midair, then slammed him to the hard floor with a clatter of chain. A jolt of fresh pain shot through his skull and Dog gasped, his eyes swiveling, tongue lolling. For long moments he lay, shocked, sucking for breath.

No!

Dog scrabbled to his paws and pulled once more toward the open landscape, straining all his muscles, but the thing that held him crushed tight around his throat.

Collared! I'm collared!

His Mother-Wolf had told him about these evil things. Longpaw-mischief! Extending his long claws, Dog dug them under the hide strap that was locked around his neck. There was barely space to get two claws in, but he managed, tearing and tugging, trying to bite and snap at it. It was no use. Dog turned, desperate.

The collar was fastened to a thick chain, and the chain was locked to a stout post that stood in the straw. That was the secret, then. Dog bit on the chain, gnawing, but he realized right away that was useless. He could not afford to break his fangs, not when he was held captive among enemies. Turning with a snarl, he attacked the post instead, tearing at it with his teeth. He could break wood; he often did, ripping apart a branch, relieving his feelings about some new insult from a Pack member.

But this wood was different. As his jaws sank into it, they met hard metal that made his gums shudder. He recoiled at the taste inside his mouth, and tried again. *No.* There was metal inside the wood, making it as unyielding as the chain.

A cold flood of panic went through his bones. *This isn't happening. It can't be.*

Something moved in the square of light, the gap that taunted him with freedom and the open sky. Dog blinked and narrowed his eyes. The shadow moved again, and suddenly he could see it clearly: the slender, powerful shape of a Fierce Dog.

Dog's muscles tensed until they were quivering. He pulled back his lips and showed his teeth as the young female stalked forward to the pen, watching him coolly.

If she'd come to taunt him, she'd get a jawful of abuse in reply. They were all so alike, the Fierce Dogs, with their shining coats and their slender muscles, but he was sure he remembered this one from the battle. However young she was, she was also savage and powerful, and he was sure those teeth had sunk into his flank.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

Dog blinked, and gave a low distrustful growl.

"Well? Do you have any bad wounds?"

Dog gave a snort of contempt, but he glanced back at his right hindleg. "One bite. Otherwise, just scratches. If I hadn't hit my head on that stone, you'd never have brought me down."

She tilted her head, as if she was amused at his ferocious pride. "Of course not. You'd have defeated us all, I'm sure, and flown home with your wolf wings."

Dog glowered. "Why didn't you just kill me?" he snarled.

"I have no idea." She gave a casual flick of her pointed ears. "It was the Rancher who brought you in. He's the one who put the collar on you. And he must have a reason, because the Rancher doesn't keep anything he doesn't have a use for."

Beneath his fur, a shiver ran down Dog's skin. He didn't want to be of use to the Rancher. Was the longpaw planning to eat him?

"Well," said the Fierce Dog, "there's water in your pen." She nodded toward two large metal bowls he hadn't

noticed, tucked in the corner of the pen. “And some food. You might as well eat and drink.”

“Why would I trust you?” Dog sniffed suspiciously at the strange dry nuggets that smelled a little like meat. His snout moved to the other bowl. That was far less resistible, and there was no hint of a taint in the clear cold water.

Suddenly Dog realized how thirsty he was; his throat ached with it and his gums were sticky. Hesitantly he dipped his jaws to the bowl, and took a few laps. It seemed pure, even if it didn’t taste quite like a mountain stream. He lapped at it again, then raised his head, his muzzle dripping. He licked his chops.

The Fierce Dog was sitting back on her haunches now. “What’s your name? I assume you’ve got one. Mine’s Calamity.”

Dog eyed her, his tongue lashing his jaws again. Already he felt stronger, after a drink. There was no way he was going to tell a strange and hostile Fierce Dog the Name his Pack had given him, the Name that was a snide joke to most of them. This one was a dog herself, and he didn’t want to claim any kinship with her, however distant.

“What kind of a name is Calamity?” His voice was edged with scorn, but he knew he was stalling.

Again Calamity’s ears flicked dismissively. “It’s not any *kind* of a name, it’s just a name. My first longpaws gave it to me, when I was at the training farm.”

Just a name? What kind of attitude was that? “That doesn’t make sense,” Dog told her stiffly. “A Name is everything. A Name is what you are.”

“All right. Tell me what you are, then.” Her expression grew sly. “What’s your name?”

“My Name’s none of your business.”

“That’s a *really* funny name.”

Dog bristled. “You know what I mean. And I don’t have to tell you my Name.”

“Suit yourself.” Calamity pricked an ear forward, looking thoughtful. “Well, I’m not barking *Noneofyourbusiness* every time I want to call you, so I’ll have to give you a name. I’ll call you Wolf.”

Dog stiffened. For a horrible moment he thought she was mocking him, just as his Pack would. Then he realized: *No. That’s what she truly thinks I am.*

He wasn’t a true wolf, but Calamity didn’t know that—or she didn’t care. If he thought about it, it was almost funny.

With a conscious effort, Dog flattened his hackles. “Go ahead,” he growled. “Call me what you like. It’s not as if I’ll be here for long.”

Calamity eyed him, her expression a little supercilious. “All right, Wolf.”

She got to her four paws and turned toward the open doorway, but she didn’t stalk out. She tilted back her head and gave a volley of deep, resonant barks.

For a little while there was no response, and Dog began to be amused at her pointless summons. But she didn’t bark again. She just stood there patiently. He’d have expected her tail to flick at the tip, but he saw with astonishment that she didn’t have one—only a small stump.

Another shape appeared at the door, this one tall and upright on two legs. Dog froze. *The longpaw. The Rancher.* Despite himself, he felt his tail fall between his hind legs, and his ears lowered with fear.

The Rancher walked forward to the pen and put a long paw on Calamity’s head; she glanced up at him trustingly, but he didn’t look at her, only at Dog. Trembling, Dog stared back into his eyes. They were crinkled in the longpaw’s sun-beaten skin, and there was a sharp intelligent light in them. Dog’s hide tightened and his leg muscles shivered. Something about the Rancher told him that escape from this place was not going to be easy.

There was fur on this longpaw’s face that was the same color as his own Alpha’s, and that made Dog wonder if this

was an Alpha longpaw. He certainly seemed to be the Alpha of these Fierce Dogs. He wasn’t quick on his feet and he didn’t look sleek and muscled, but Calamity was still gazing up at him, submissive, her eyes warm and soft, and when he uttered a strange longpaw word, she tucked her haunches swiftly under her and sat.

The Rancher leaned over the pen fence as Dog shrank back. Craning his furred head, he studied Dog’s face and his legs and his flanks. Dog could feel his keen eyes roaming all over him, and it made his hide itch.

Once again the Rancher patted Calamity’s head, and growled some unintelligible longpaw words. Calamity gave a soft whine that sounded like agreement. She turned her head to gaze at Dog with, he thought, exactly the same expression as the longpaw.

Dog’s haunches were pressed against the wooden wall at the rear of the pen; there was nowhere he could go, no room to back farther away. *If he comes into the pen, what do I do? Attack him? Try to get past, and run for the hills?*

But the Rancher didn’t come in. He made one more coughing sound, gave Calamity a final pat on the head, then turned on his heel and walked out.

Dog didn’t understand. Was the longpaw going to leave him here, a prisoner? *Why?* Misery and helplessness rose in his rib cage, threatening to choke him. All he could do was tip back his head, and give a great despairing howl.

CHAPTER SIX

The food in the bowl was not like deer or rabbit, and it tasted strange, but by the time the unseen sun went down and the sky dimmed to blue gray, Dog was ravenous. If he was going to give his captors the slip and run far away from here, he knew he had to keep up his strength. So he mouthed a few of the dry nuggets, wrinkling his muzzle with distaste at first; then he found himself crunching them down faster and faster. He'd gulped the whole bowlful before he realized he'd done it.

He was lapping at the water bowl again, the dry meat having given him a raging thirst, when he heard the click of claws on a timber floor. Four dogs, he realized, pricking his ears forward as he drank. Slowly he raised his dripping muzzle.

"That's about all you can hunt, isn't it, Wolf?" The dog in the lead's lips wrinkled back in a sneer. "Food from a sack."

Another of the Fierce Dogs gave a bark of laughter. "No wonder his Pack abandoned him. He's not much of a wolf at all, is he?"

Dog stared at them, cold with loathing. Calamity was with them, though she said nothing.

"Let me out of this pen," he growled, "and I'll show you what kind of a wolf I am."

"Oh, you'll be out of there soon enough." The leader took a pace forward, sniffing disdainfully at the fence. "You're one of us now. Get used to it."

"I'm not one of you."

"You will be," grunted the second dog. "The Rancher wants it, so that's what will happen."

"That's if you don't want to be put down," added the leader.

Dog narrowed his eyes. "Put where?"

All four of them laughed this time. “Put nowhere, just put down forever! Put down so you’ll never get up again!” barked the leader, showing his fangs. “With the loudstick.”

A ripple of fear shuddered through Dog’s hide.

“So,” went on the leader, when Dog did not reply, “we’d better introduce ourselves. I am Sundance, and I’m the Alpha of your new Pack. Don’t ever forget it. This is Zorro”—he nodded at his second in command—“and these two are Belle and Calamity.”

Dog’s eyes caught Calamity’s. Hadn’t she told them, then, that she’d already been in here talking to him? “Those aren’t proper Names, and I don’t need to know them. I’m not going to be part of your Pack. My own Pack’s coming back for me, with a lot more wolves.”

He tried to sound more convinced than he felt, but even so, Sundance’s muzzle curled. “No. They’re not. You think they’d risk our jaws for a creature like you?”

“Even if they don’t I’ll get away myself,” snapped Dog.

“What incredible teeth you must have,” yawned Sundance, sitting back on his haunches. “I look forward to seeing you bite straight through that chain.”

There was nothing Dog could say to that. All he could do was snarl in defiance. But at that moment he heard it: a distant, mournful howling that echoed in the faraway blue hills.

Dog’s skin shivered beneath his fur, and his muscles went rigid. He stood quite still on all fours, his ears and nostrils and whiskers yearning toward the sound. If he pricked his ears hard enough, he might make out voices he knew—Graceful, perhaps, or Quick. He’d even be glad to hear Daring.

But the Fierce Dogs had heard it, too. They turned, tensing, their hindquarters quivering as they listened to the sound. A very low, constant growl began to rumble in Sundance’s throat.

He gave an abrupt commanding bark. “Form up! We’re going wolf hunting!”

“No!” barked Dog, but they had already raced from the barn. Straining at his collar, he let out a frantic volley of yelps. Once again he ripped with his claws at the collar, and he turned to tear uselessly with his fangs at the wooden post. It was hopeless.

I’m trapped in this awful place, he thought in agony, *while those dogs attack the wolves who came to rescue me!* Despair and fury surged in his blood, but even that rush of sensation couldn’t give him enough strength to break the post. At last, panting, his flanks heaving, he could only stand there, the collar taut around his throat, and stare through the open barn door.

The hills were invisible now except as empty shadows against a star-speckled sky. The blackness of the night felt oppressive, and Dog could no longer hear barks or howls or yelps, even in the far distance.

He lay down, his head on his paws, and waited.

It seemed an achingly long and tense time before moving shadows appeared on the meadow, growing larger as they approached the barn.

Dog’s heart sank in his rib cage. It was the Fierce Dogs, back from their hunt, all four of them in one piece.

Sundance stalked into the barn and right up to the pen fence, head high, an expression of arrogance on his face. His eyes flashed with the excitement of a fight. “I love a good chase.”

Chase? Not a fight? “They’ll be back,” growled Dog.

“I doubt that,” said Zorro. “They weren’t even coming for you this time.”

“You’re lying.” Dog curled his muzzle back from his fangs.

“He isn’t,” mocked Sundance. “Those flea-bitten brutes you call a Pack weren’t on their way here. They were

leaving. *Without you.* We made sure they did it a lot faster."

Dog's breath was coming in fast panicked rasps now. "That isn't true. They'll come for me!"

"We've driven them farther into the mountains." Belle cocked her head to watch him with contempt. "They won't be back to raid the Rancher's sheep. We made sure of that, even though they'd have been too frightened anyway."

"Cowards," spat Sundance, licking his shoulder. "And we only had to kill one of them."

Dog's blood ran cold. Somehow he knew Sundance wouldn't lie; why would he bother? "Which wolf did you kill?" Dog's bark was so hoarse he could barely hear it himself.

"How would I know?" Sundance's ears flicked. "Some old she-wolf who couldn't run fast."

"I don't think she couldn't run," remarked Zorro, giving Dog a sly look. "She was dragging behind, that's all. Kept staring back, like she didn't want to leave."

Dog felt incapable of moving, almost incapable of breathing. Zorro was still watching him insolently.

"So it was her own fault Sundance brought her down. Isn't that right, Boss?"

"I had to give a lesson to the others, anyway," growled Sundance. "And she didn't even bother to beg. Just kept asking what had happened to her pup. The one who got left behind at the longpaw's ranch." Zorro smirked.

"Don't worry. I told her you were fine." Sundance bent to lick idly at his paw. "I told her you'd begged to join the Fierce Dogs. Told her you'd rolled over and pleaded to be in our Pack." He raised his head to stare at Dog. "So I'm sure she was perfectly content when I killed her."

Dog flew at him. Barking, raging, howling, he flung himself again and again at the Fierce Dogs, scrabbling wildly in hopeless fury. The collar jerked so tight around his throat it dug into his flesh with every lunge, and he was gasping

for breath, but still he threw himself forward. His vision was blurred and red, darkening by the instant.

It was useless. As the fury drained from his veins, he staggered, then lurched sideways, collapsing to the timber floor. His tongue lolled as he dragged breath into his lungs, the collar almost strangling him. Before his dulling vision he saw the shapes of three Fierce Dogs turn contemptuously and pace out of the barn.

“Wolf. Wolf!” Calamity was still there. She was lying on her forepaws, her nose stretched out through the wooden railings. “Wolf, you have to calm down.”

“Calm down?” He lurched to his paws again, struggling. “No!”

“Yes, Wolf. Stop fighting. Please, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Hurt? He killed my Mother-Wolf!” His strangled barking hoarsened as he felt the collar tighten again.

“Don’t let him do the same to you!” Calamity stood up, pressing her face to the bars of the fence.

Flanks heaving, Dog stared at her, still gasping for breath. He backed off a pace, and felt the collar loosen a little. His throat was a dry agony.

“They left you.” There was anger in Calamity’s voice, but Dog had the odd feeling she wasn’t angry with him. “Don’t give Sundance the satisfaction of choking yourself, because your Pack isn’t worth it. They’ve abandoned you.”

It’s true. They’ve gone to the mountains without me.

“Quick will come,” he whined, but he didn’t even believe it himself now.

“Quick, whoever he is, has turned tail and fled. He’s left you here with the Rancher and with us.” Calamity’s words were harsh, but her voice was gentle.

Quick was never going to come for me. He truly doesn’t care and he never has.

Dog tipped his head back and let out a ringing, grief-stricken howl. *Graceful is dead. She’s dead.*

He would never speak to her again, would never curl up against her warm flanks in their den. She would never lie quietly, telling him stories of his lost sire, reassuring him that his Name was a fine one, a Name to be proud of. *Graceful's dead, and she thinks I abandoned her with a happy heart.*

He'd left her with harsh words. He'd never told Graceful he was sorry for what he'd said about his sire, sorry for the shame he felt about his blood. *And now I never will*. His howl rose in pitch, echoing with remorse and regret. He wished it could reach Graceful, running now with the Great Wolf, but he knew no howl, however piercing, could do that.

I've lost her forever.

As Dog lay down on his forepaws, sunk in his misery, Calamity turned and paced sadly from the barn, leaving him alone to grieve.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Through a dark fog of sleep and grim dreams, Dog heard a sharp clatter that made his head jerk up from sleep. Dizzied, he blinked at the morning sunshine that slanted into the barn, burnishing the straw with early golden light.

Dog kicked out, raking the straw beneath him as he staggered to his paws. The Rancher was there, right in the pen with him, setting down fresh bowls of water and dusty dry meat.

Dog hunched his shoulders low, a growl beginning at the back of his aching throat. This was the longpaw who had taken him from his Pack, had sent his Fangs to kill Dog's mother. Dog sprang at him.

The fur-faced longpaw turned with surprising agility. Too late Dog saw the hefty stick in his hand; he felt it smack down across his muzzle.

Flinching back, Dog was unable to suppress a shocked whimper of pain. The Rancher was eyeing him closely but without fear. His long-fingered paws were sheathed in thick hide and he held the stick in both of them, alert and ready to whack it down again.

Dog's eyes shifted to the bowl of food; the Rancher was between it and him. If he couldn't even eat—

He lunged again, his fangs bared. Once more the stick smacked down, catching his skull hard enough to make stars explode behind his eyes. Dog whined and shrank back.

This is intolerable! Dog snarled and jumped, and this time the stick caught him on the nose again, even harder. He yelped and crouched, confused and angry.

The Rancher only watched him, tapping the stick lightly against one of his sheathed paws. Dog eyed him back, wary now and afraid of that stinging stick. He took a couple of shuffling paces forward toward the food bowl, his stomach

growling and his jaws slavering with hunger. When the Rancher didn’t hit him again, he crawled past his feet, almost close enough to touch the longpaw. He pulled himself up, dipped his muzzle into the bowl and began, resentfully, to eat.

The Rancher’s front paws were so nimble, Dog’s mouth was still full of meat nuggets when he felt the pressure on his neck ease. The longpaw had loosed him from the wooden post! For a moment he was too confused even to swallow, and then he felt a new and different pressure on his throat.

Another collar. Different!

This one felt cold, like metal instead of hide, with a stiff leash already attached to it, tethering Dog to the Rancher’s paws. Dog turned, snapping, but the collar instantly contracted on his throat. He went rigid, his eyes rolling. Only when he let his muscles relax did the collar loosen too, and he could breathe easily again.

“Wolf.” The voice was familiar.

He looked around. Calamity stood outside the pen with the other Fierce Dogs, watching every move the Rancher made.

“The Rancher is your Alpha now, Wolf,” she told him. “Just accept that, and do as he tells you. The sooner you learn it, the sooner the collar will stop squeezing you.”

Dog tucked his tail tightly between his hind legs. He couldn’t help it—the squeeze collar frightened him. When the Rancher twitched on its stiff leash and nudged him toward the pen’s open gate, Dog wanted to resist, but the thought of the collar forced him to obey. He slunk after the longpaw, his hackles rigid with fear.

Despite the Rancher and the squeeze collar and the Fierce Dogs around him, it was bliss for Dog to step outside the dusty barn and into the cool sunlit air. The sky was blue enough to hurt his eyes, and off in the distance the tree-edged hills were hazy. His nostrils twitched, finding the

heavy warm scent of sheep that had got him into this trouble in the first place. Despite that, their meaty odor was irresistible, and Dog jerked toward the milling creatures in a corner of the meadow. Instantly the squeeze collar tightened, and he gasped a wheezing breath. Shivering, he shrank back.

"Now." Sundance padded around the Rancher to gaze at Dog with disdain. "We'll begin your training."

Dog had no intention of being trained, but every day for a full change of the moon the Rancher would come to his pen and bring him out into the field. The squeeze collar and the snapping jaws of the Fierce Dogs were always with him, and the Rancher's loudstick was never far from his thoughts.

By the end of Dog's first day of training, he had grown to hate the squeeze collar with a fierce passion. The Rancher would not let him make so much as a move without a sharp bark of command, and if Dog rebelled, the metal would tighten on his soft throat muscles. Dog didn't want to do anything this cold-voiced longpaw told him to do. By the time the sun went down and Dog was tethered back to the wood-and-metal post, his jaws were flecked with foam and his throat stung from the collar and from thirst.

Each time the Rancher barked an order, Sundance, at his side, would snap an instruction at Dog, letting him know what the longpaw wanted. At least he could understand the Fierce Dog's commands, thought Dog angrily. At least then he could obey whatever pointless command the longpaw gave, and the collar would leave him alone.

At every hesitation, at every sullen growl, the collar would tighten again. By the middle of the second day Dog had begun to obey swiftly, if only so that he wouldn't choke to death. Some words the longpaw snapped so often, after a few days Dog began to recognize them. By the time the moon had turned from full and round to a bright sliver in the

sky, he knew how to respond to them. He felt an odd sense of achievement at no longer needing the scornful Sundance to interpret his Alpha's barks. If the Fierce Dogs were smart enough to understand the Rancher, Dog could learn to do it too. *Heel* was easy enough: walk beside the Rancher. *Sit* sent him back on his haunches. *No:* well, that clearly meant *Stop what you're doing or the collar will tighten.*

And if he was unsure, then the responses of the other Fierce Dogs gave him a clue. It was obvious to Dog that they really did see the Rancher as their Alpha. At the first sound of his voice, each dog would leap to obey, and when they'd done what he asked, he gave them something fine-smelling from a pouch at his side. Dog watched that behavior, licking his chops, but he wouldn't beg. *I won't take his stinking rewards. I hate him, and I hate his Fangs.*

And yet . . . he had nowhere else to go. Every now and then the knowledge would pierce him, making his belly twist with regret and sorrow. *My Pack has left me; what choice do I have? Where else can I go?*

And it was strange, but somewhere deep in his bones he began to feel a tug at the sound of the Rancher's voice. He struggled against the urge to respond, desperately trying to resist, to remind himself that he was a wild wolf . . . but without disobeying so that the Rancher would use the squeeze collar or give him another sharp tap across the muzzle with his stick.

There was something else, too: He was beginning to admire these Fierce Dogs' pack behavior. They moved as if they were a single creature, a single mind. They worked as a team, with all the discipline his Pack had lacked, the strength of trusting teamwork that would have served them so well in a hunt. The realization struck him at the end of a long day of *sit*, *heel*, and *fetch*, as he watched the Fierce Dogs fan out across the meadow to chase the sheep into their dens for the night. Not one of them broke the perfect

line that swept across the grass or tried to sneak a bite of the sheep for themselves.

These dogs would never abandon a Packmate. Not ever.

The thought itched at his mind as the days wore on. How many days had it been since he'd been abandoned here? Fifteen, twenty? He had lost count, though he knew the moon had vanished and returned again as it always did.

His misery at his Pack's desertion was warming slowly to anger. In a way he was glad of the relentless training, the hard repetitive work the Rancher was putting him through, because he had no time to gnaw endlessly at what his Pack had done to him. It was there, in the corner of his mind, that was all, niggling and distracting, but the rage couldn't eat at his guts. There was too much to do, and it was becoming instinctive.

By the time the moon was a shining circle in the sky once more, Dog barely remembered a time when he didn't wake up with the scent of sawn wood, the fuzzy coats of the sheep, and the bowl of satisfying dry food. When he followed the longpaw out into the meadow for his training, it was as if they'd been working together for many moons instead of just one. The Rancher gave a command, and Dog's body obeyed it.

Obeyed! The realization almost brought him to a halt as he walked at the Rancher's command; but his legs moved anyway, keeping to the longpaw's side. The strange urge in his bones, the yearning to listen, had taken over command of his muscles. And he hadn't even paused to cock his ear to the Rancher's words.

"*Sit.*" The word brought his haunches beneath him, his tail tucked close, and he looked up at the Rancher.

The Rancher's face wrinkled, an expression Dog had learned went with the patting and scratching gestures that the Fierce Dogs seemed to enjoy so much. The longpaw rummaged in that sweet-smelling pouch. Dog took the small chunk of dry pig meat he offered, gulping it down. It tasted

every bit as good as it had smelled when the others were rewarded.

The longpaw leaned over him, so close Dog could have snapped at his furred throat, but the urge seemed to have abandoned him as thoroughly as his Pack had. The Rancher's paws were at his throat, taking off the squeeze collar and fitting another.

The longpaw straightened, and he gestured at the far side of the field. "*Rope. Fetch.*"

Dog knew both words now. It didn't even occur to him to question the Rancher's command; he bounded across the field, loving the freedom of the new collar and the feel of the meadowgrass beneath his racing paw pads. As his jaws closed on the coil of rope by the paddock fence, he glanced up and felt a rush of pleasure to see Calamity at his side. Her jaws were parted happily and her ears were pricked forward.

"You're doing a brilliant job, Wolf."

He panted for a moment, unsure how to answer. Calamity gave him a low bark of encouragement.

"Keep it up, and you'll sleep in a proper dog bed tonight with us. Your new Pack! It's warm and cozy, Wolf. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Slowly, he found himself nodding. "I suppose it would . . ."

I'd like that, he thought. *I'd like not to be cold and alone in the barn. I'd like to have treats from the pouch, to eat well, to sleep with a Pack that's confident and strong and disciplined.*

Anyway, he thought: Would it be so bad to be a Longpaw Fang? Would it be so bad to work for the Rancher, to do his bidding and hear his voice praise Dog for a job well done? To be appreciated by a strong Alpha?

I'd like to please the Rancher. The thought made his tail tap with enthusiasm, even as somewhere in his gut it horrified him.

As the sun dipped behind the ranch house, he padded with the Fierce Dogs at the Rancher’s back, tired, his legs aching, but with an odd and not unpleasant sense of work well done. He was led not back to the barn, but to a shed closer to the Rancher’s house.

The longpaw fastened a rope to the new, softer collar; it was loose and it gave him more range than the one in the barn. The metal bowl beside him was full of the meat nuggets that seemed much more appealing than they had the first time he’d tried them.

He gulped at them, not caring about the loose rope that tangled between his legs. Sundance growled and snapped, and he and Zorro shoved Dog’s head aside so that they could steal some of his food, but there was more than enough, and Dog ignored their sniping. It was more than he’d ever eaten with his traitorous Pack.

“Wolf, you can sleep here,” whined Calamity softly, wriggling aside on a big patterned cushion.

“He should sleep in a dirt heap,” growled Zorro.

Sundance rumbled in agreement. “Like he did with those filthy wolves.”

Dog decided he wouldn’t dignify their scorn with any retort, but Calamity snapped, “Shut your jaws, both of you. Wolf worked well today.”

Gratefully, Dog settled himself on half of the bed beside her. It gave under his weight, fitting snugly around him and warming his hide. Even warmer, though, was Calamity’s flank, pressed against his. He could feel her muscles twitching as she began to drowse. With the other Fierce Dogs so close, Dog thought he might not be able to relax, but his tiredness and the comfort overwhelmed him. He fell asleep to the sound of Calamity’s steady breathing, the rise and fall of her sides, and the scent of her hide in his nostrils.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Against the low line of the mountains, a huge pale moon was rising. The grass and trees shimmered under a silver light that was strong enough to cast Wolf's shadow. Another long shadow stretched beside his: Calamity's. She padded close by his side as Wolf and his new Pack made their way back to the shed from a day's herding work.

"Did you see how Zorro let that ewe play him for a fool?" whispered Calamity.

Wolf glanced over his shoulder. The other three Fierce Dogs walked together, a few paces behind. He knew he'd turned out to be very good at his job, and Sundance and his cronies had never quite forgiven him for it, or Calamity for liking him. Even now Belle was shooting him a filthy look.

"The ewe wasn't even that smart." Wolf grinned. "All she had to do was pin herself in the corner. He didn't have a clue what to do except bark like an idiot."

"He lost his head." Calamity gave a snort of laughter. "And Zorro thinks he's so smart." She gave Wolf a sudden, affectionate lick on the jaw.

Wolf felt a thrill run through his hide. He swept his tongue over her pointed ear in return. As they trotted into the shed, he followed her to the bed and sat, pricking his ears at the Rancher as he waited for him to clip his leash to the wall.

But the Rancher didn't. He settled Sundance and Zorro and Belle, then turned to Wolf and Calamity with a wave of his front paw.

"*Heel.*"

After these last few moons, Wolf didn't even have to think about the response. He was on his paws as fast as Calamity, walking at the Rancher's side as he led them back out of the shed.

“What’s happening?” he whispered past the Rancher’s striding legs.

Calamity looked happy, her eyes shining. “It’s our turn to stand guard tonight. That means our Alpha completely trusts you!”

Wolf felt his heart swell, and not only with pleasure at his Alpha’s confidence in him. He remembered his nights of patrol duty with his old Pack, before he was promoted to be a hunter. Those nights had been long and usually boring, since his fellow Packmates would barely exchange a civil word with him. He’d never had such pleasant company as Calamity.

The Rancher stopped, patting their heads and offering each of them a treat from the pouch before striding off toward his home. Wolf and Calamity were about to set off along the fence when a shadow moved behind them.

“Calamity,” growled Sundance.

She tilted her head. “Yes, Sundance?”

“You’re in charge.” The Fierce Dog shot a glower at Wolf. “You’re to make sure the sheep are safe, but you’re also to make sure Wolf behaves himself. I don’t want any mistakes.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Calamity rolled her eyes and sighed. “I’ll keep a *very* close eye on him.” She grinned at Wolf, and let her tongue loll.

Wolf felt a rumble of amusement in his throat, but he managed to repress it while Sundance fixed him with his hostile eyes. Then Calamity was trotting happily off along the fence, and with a last glare at Sundance, Wolf followed.

Just as he’d expected, Calamity was a good patrol companion. Quietly, they paced between the sheep pens and the farmhouse, sniffing and pricking their ears for any sign of trouble. Wolf’s fur prickled with alertness, and as the moon rose higher he kept his paws quiet and his nose sensitive to every fleeting scent. But as the time passed, and he detected no threats, he began to relax. With the quiet, intent Calamity at his side, he felt as if they were a

single entity, a perfect partnership. Each of them seemed to know without speaking when to pause and sniff, and when to move on. No enemy had a chance of getting past them.

As they halted by the meadow fence, Calamity sat down and tilted her head. “It’s so calm. Nothing’s even moving. How about a race?”

Wolf’s ears came forward. “A race?”

“Yes. Not scared, are you?” She squirmed through the gap between the fence and the gate. “Oh, of course you are. I’m sorry! You know I’ll beat you!”

“Ha!” Wolf wriggled through after her. “You’ll be sorry you said that!”

“The far fence and back.” She sprang into a run, taking him by surprise, and her haunches were already several paces ahead of him when he started after her. Wolf sprinted, his paws pounding, his leg muscles extending his stride until he was abreast of her; then he drew ahead. Beneath his paws the grass was damp and moon-silvered, and he could hear her panting, laughing breaths close behind.

I’ve never been this happy, he thought, with a sweet sense of shock.

At the fence, Wolf skidded in the earth onto his haunches, twisted and leaped back the other way. Calamity had turned early, taking a sneaky advantage, but still he caught up, flying past her. When they reached the fence, she collided with his hindquarters and they tumbled to the ground in a tangle of legs. Wolf grabbed her neck in his jaws, but gently, play-shaking her until she twisted from his grip and grabbed his muzzle in hers.

At last, exhausted, they flopped together onto their sides, tongues lolling. Above them the stars were brightening despite the hugeness of the moon. Scents of pine and aspen and sagebrush drifted to Wolf’s nostrils, but he felt no urge to run to the hills. He wanted to stay right here.

“Calamity,” he said, and hesitated.

“What?”

He licked his chops, getting his breath back. *And not just because of the race,* he realized. “I just . . . I don’t really know how to say this, but . . . “

“Give it a try.” She twisted her head to stare at him.

It came out in a rush. “I’ve never liked any wolf or dog as much as I like you.”

For a moment she was silent, and he thought his heart had stopped beating in his chest.

“I feel that way too,” she murmured at last.

A rush of relief and happiness swept through his hide. “Oh. Good.”

“Wolf, do you still think about running away?” Her eyes were dark and steady on his.

He cocked an ear toward the hills and sighed. “Yes,” he admitted. Then he met her eyes again. “But if you’ll be my mate, I’ll stay here forever.”

Her jaws opened and her eyes widened, but before she could speak again, there was an eruption of panicked squawking across the yard.

“The chicken cages!” Calamity bounded to her paws.

Wolf sprang up and ran. Sure enough, the racket was coming from the wire cages where the fat chickens roosted, and there was a tang in his nostrils that he remembered from his wild days. Not wolf, not fox . . . His lips peeled back from his teeth.

Coyote!

“You take the yard side!” he growled, and Calamity peeled away, running round the wire fencing. Wolf slowed, his legs stiff as he stalked closer to the tall gate. He could see now where the wire hung agape, the catch left carelessly loose. *My territory,* he thought savagely. *And these birds belong to my Alpha. No coyote takes prey from my protector. . . .*

Silently he crept closer, nudging the gate wider, easing his shoulder into the run. *There!*

Wolf stopped, one paw lifted.

Coyotes usually ran in gangs, he knew that, but this one was alone. *Like me. Like* I *was. . . .*

In the hatched moonlight Wolf could make out the coyote's jutting ribs, its disheveled coat. As it moved stealthily toward the frantically clucking chickens, it lurched oddly, and Wolf realized it was using only three of its skinny legs. He moved along the inside of the cage, watching it, stunned by pity.

Wild thing. Exiled from its Pack. Alone and hungry . . .

The coyote lunged, snatching a red hen. Its eyes widened as it caught sight of Wolf, and then it darted past him, a flash of pale scraggy fur, and shot through the open gate.

No! Wolf twisted and raced after it, but he could already hear the pounding paws of the other Fierce Dogs. They were running across the yard, cutting off the coyote as it fled in panic, the chicken hampering it.

Sundance reached it first, pouncing and slamming the smaller creature to the ground. The coyote rolled and tumbled, dropping the chicken, but by that time Zorro and Belle were on it as well. Teeth snapped and claws flashed, and when the panting Fierce Dogs at last drew back, the coyote was nothing but a bloody scrap, limp and tattered in the mud. The chicken was a lifeless heap of rumpled feathers beside it.

Sundance tipped back his head and raised the alarm, sharp deep barks that Wolf knew would summon the Rancher. His hide and his spine chilled. *What have I done?*

Or what have I failed to do?

As the Rancher came hurrying from the house, a beam of light bouncing in his paw, Sundance spun on his haunches and loosed a ferocious snarling howl right in Wolf's face. Wolf could do nothing but stand rigid, his fur prickling. Even Calamity, padding miserably to his side, couldn't reassure him.

This was my fault. I hesitated too long, showed too much pity. Now they'll separate us. The Rancher will chain me up again.

He backed closer to Calamity as Sundance, Zorro, and Belle surrounded them both. His hackles rose, but he knew there was no point attacking his Packmates. He couldn't fight three.

And Calamity. What about her?

The two of them stood trembling together; Wolf could feel the quivering of her hide. Zorro and Belle lowered their forequarters and snarled as Sundance took another pace forward.

"You've let the Pack down. *You've let down our Alpha!* You've failed, both of you!"

"Sundance," Wolf began. "It was my—"

"*Be silent!* You can't be trusted!" Sundance's vicious head swiveled to Calamity. *"Neither of you!"*

She crouched, trying to lower her pointed ears. "I'm sorry, Sundance."

"You will be. You failed in your most solemn duty. You'll both be punished."

CHAPTER NINE

The barn door slammed behind the Rancher, and he was gone. The fact that he hadn't said a single angry word did not reassure Wolf. He and Calamity pressed against the barn wall, eyeing the three Fierce Dogs who held them pinned there.

Inside the vast barn it was shockingly dark, as if the great moon outside had been extinguished altogether. But Wolf could still make out the glint of hatred in Sundance's eyes. He glanced at Calamity. She was watching her Alpha, and her limbs were shaking, but her eyes did not drop from Sundance's.

For the first time in weeks, Wolf felt the old wild wolf anger rising in his chest. What right did these Fangs of Longpaws have to threaten him? What right did they have to threaten his *mate*?

He took an aggressive pace toward Sundance, turning his body slightly to shield Calamity. "What kind of punishment?" he growled.

"Not as much as you deserve," snarled Sundance. "You'll be marked. Permanently. At least that will remind you to do your duty."

Wolf froze. *Marked? How?* But before he could respond, Zorro and Belle sprang for him, knocking him to the ground and pinning him down with their powerful forequarters. Wolf struggled, snapping and twisting, but there were two Fierce Dogs on him and they were strong.

Sundance moved swiftly. One of Wolf's forelegs sprawled on the floor, and the Fierce Dog lunged, raking his claws down Wolf's paw. For a second Wolf didn't feel it; then the pain hit. He howled. The slash in his flesh was deep and bloody.

Zorro and Belle rolled off him and stood up as Wolf cringed back, licking frantically at his paw. As he rested it on the ground he felt pain shoot up his foreleg again, but he could tell it wasn't so serious as to lame him. He'd still be able to walk and run. Sundance knew exactly what he was doing.

Wolf would carry the shameful scar for life.

They've done this to me for the sake of a chicken. And I let them do it! He raised his head to glare his hatred at Sundance. *If I'd been a real wolf, I'd have taken the hens myself. And I would never have let him do this to me!*

"Calamity," growled Sundance. "Show me your paw."

Wolf's fury drained abruptly, replaced by horror. "No! It was my fault! *Me.* You can't punish her, she didn't—"

"She was your fellow guard, and I warned her she was in charge. It's as much her fault as it is yours. Your paw, Calamity."

With one glance at Wolf, Calamity stepped forward. Zorro and Belle didn't even need to pin her down. She lay down on her belly, her head pressed low, and extended her foreleg toward Sundance.

"No!" barked Wolf, and sprang forward.

Teeth seized the soft skin of his neck, and another set of jaws grabbed his shoulder. Zorro and Belle wrestled him down, not breaking the skin this time, but gripping him hard enough to hurt and dragging him back from Calamity and Sundance. Wolf could do nothing but watch as Sundance raised his paw and slashed Calamity's sleek forepaw.

Wolf heard her give the faintest, choked whine.

Zorro and Belle released him contemptuously, and Wolf staggered, but he couldn't even snap at them. He could only stare at the shivering Calamity as the three other Fierce Dogs stalked disdainfully to the barn door. It opened to Sundance's yelp, and he heard the Rancher's low voice praising the brute before the door closed again.

Calamity half rose and slunk to a pile of straw, turning and curling up. If she'd had a tail, it would have been tucked tightly beneath her legs. She didn't look at Wolf as he padded hesitantly up to her, then gently licked the tip of her ear.

She flinched from his touch. "Leave me alone."

"I'm sorry, Calamity, you didn't deserve this—"

"Yes. I did." Her voice was muffled. "Sundance is right. I failed in my duty."

"You didn't. I did." Stepping close, Wolf tried to settle down beside her, but suddenly she raised her head and snapped.

"I said, leave me alone!"

Wolf backed off, shocked. He tightened his tail between his legs as he stared at the back of Calamity's head. *She blames me. And she's right.*

His heart like a stone of misery in his rib cage, Wolf padded to the barn door and lay down. It wasn't latched or locked; the Rancher knew his dogs would never run away. He was their Alpha, wasn't he?

Wolf nudged open a narrow gap so that he could gaze out at the speckled black sky over the far hills. He only knew where the hills were because that was where the stars stopped.

I pitied that coyote, just for a moment. And look where it got me. Scarred for life, and Calamity too.

Wolf wished that he could sleep, but his mind was in turmoil. *What am I doing here? I'm as pitiable as that coyote, and it's dead.* Sundance, he knew, would have liked to give Wolf the punishment he'd given the coyote. But his scar of shame—was even that a proper punishment for one mistake? What kind of a Pack was this?

But how could I ever live without a Pack?

Rising, he nudged the barn door wider and limped out to the yard. The moon was smaller now, and lower in the sky,

but it was still there. Wolf sat back on his haunches and let out a howl of desperate misery.

Great Wolf, help me. Who am I? Dog or Wolf?

As his howl faded, something tingled in his hackles. He went still.

No giant starlit wolf bounded down from the night sky, like she did in the old stories. But he'd felt *something.*

It was like a tug, insistent and demanding, at the nape of his neck. Something was calling him—calling him away from here, away toward the hills. He smelled sagebrush and aspen on the breeze again, and this time he yearned toward it.

The forest. I have to be there. Not here.

And yet . . .

Wolf padded on silent paws back into the barn. Calamity still lay in the straw, absolutely still, but he knew she wasn't asleep. He nudged her muzzle, very gently, with his own.

"Calamity," he whispered. "I need to leave this place."

Slowly she raised her slender head and turned it toward him. Her eyes were dark and very clear, but unhappy. "What about your promise?"

"I still want you to be my mate. But I can't stay here. Come with me. Please, Calamity."

For long moments she gazed at him; then she shook her head.

"This is my family," she whispered. "The Rancher. Sundance and Zorro and Belle. Whatever else they are, they're my Pack."

Wolf took a breath. "Even though they—"

"Yes. Even though they did that. Wolf, I'm happy here. It's the only world I've ever known. I don't belong in yours."

"I think you do." Closing his eyes, he nuzzled her jaw.

"I can't, Wolf. Don't ask me. I can't."

If I leave, then, I leave without Calamity.

"In that case," he murmured, "I'll stay." His heart was heavy inside him, but he knew he couldn't leave her. "I'll

stay with you.”

“No.” Giving a great sigh, she gazed into his eyes. “Wolf, you have to go. You *need* to go.”

“But—” Pain sawed inside him.

“If you stay, now? With me? You’ll grow to hate me.”

“No! I—”

“Yes, you will. You’ll hate me for keeping you here and you’ll hate yourself for letting me.” She licked his face gently. “You’re right, Wolf. You can’t be happy here. So go, right now. I’ll give you as much of a start as I can. I promise. But I’ll have to raise the alarm in a little while. If I don’t, it’s not just a scarred paw they’ll give me. Do you see?”

Cold and heavy with sadness, Wolf licked his chops. He nodded slowly. “Yes,” he said. “I do see. But I’ll miss you, Calamity. So much.”

“I’ll miss you too, more than I can say.” Rising, she pressed her elegant head to his neck. “But go, and go quickly. Please.”

Wolf stayed for another moment, breathing in Calamity’s warm scent one more time. Then he turned and bounded for the barn door and out into the yard. He couldn’t bear to look back, so he kept running despite the pain in his injured paw, racing for the fence, seeking out the hole where he’d wriggled into the meadow what felt like a lifetime ago.

With my brother and my Pack. But they’re not that anymore. I’ll be on my own. But at least I’ll be free. He dived for the hole.

No!

It had been stuffed full of fresh earth and stones; the soil was slightly loose but the grass was already growing over it. He knew he could never dig through it in time.

Another worry prickled at his fur.

Calamity needs to raise the alarm, and soon. I can’t let more harm come to her—

Wolf twisted his head from side to side, searching desperately for an exit. *The sheep field!*

There was a rickety wooden shelter in one corner of it, next to a gnarled tree: a rough structure to protect the sheep from bad weather if they needed it. Wolf bounded for the meadow, skidded through the gate and dashed for the shelter.

It was perhaps the height of two sheep. Wolf did not hesitate, but raced faster as he approached its star-silvered outline. With one massive thrust of his haunches, he leaped, scrabbling onto its slanted roof.

Now he could hear furious barks, echoing through the yard, and the pounding of strong paws on flattened earth. They were coming for him, racing across the yard: four sets of paws. *Calamity raised the alarm. She'll be fine!*

But will I?

Wolf faced the fence. It wasn't high from the top of the sheep shelter, but there was wire with spines running along the top, and the tree branches were obstructing him.

Sundance's raging barks rang in his ears, much closer now, filled with hate. *He can't get me!*

Wolf leaped. His claws found an overhanging branch, and he hauled himself with raking claws onto it. His bushy tail snagged in a spine on the wire, but he tugged himself forward. The scents of the forest filled his nostrils now, and that something was calling to him again. *The hills, and the rivers, and the forests, and freedom—*

Jump, Wolf!

He plunged down just as Sundance's jaws snapped on his tail. Twisting, Wolf dragged himself free, and tumbled hard to the earth below, the forest litter breaking the worst of his fall. His coat was full of grit and soil and pine needles, but suddenly he didn't want to shake it off. The scent of sagebrush filled his head, and he could barely even hear Sundance's enraged squealing snarls.

Getting to his paws, Wolf glanced back through the fence at the furious, howling Fierce Dogs. Their eyes were savage and murderous—all but one. Calamity was barking with the

others but her eyes were soft and sad and happy all at once. He thought he could almost hear her voice inside his skull.

Good-bye, Wolf. Be happy.

He turned tail, and raced for the woods and for freedom.

CHAPTER TEN

The valley where he stood sloped down to a winding blue river fringed with trees and scrub. Farther away the forest grew denser, with pines and firs, until it blurred into hazy lilac mountains. Maybe his Pack was out there somewhere.

Maybe they are, but I won't be looking for them.

They'd abandoned him to the Fierce Dogs, thought Wolf. They'd betrayed him, and there was no going back.

I'm on my own.

Better that, he thought as he trotted down through the brush toward the valley floor, than to be back with the Rancher. He was lonely, but he knew it would pass. A shudder of sadness went through his gut when he thought of Calamity, but he would try not to think of her too often.

He missed Graceful, too. As he journeyed on through river and forest, he found he even missed the Fierce Dogs; but he could shake that off quite easily. *It's just that they were a Pack,* he thought. *Not for long, but they were my Pack.*

He hoped he'd find another. He was no undisciplined Lone Wolf, snatching prey where he could find it.

The hunger in his stomach was more insistent than the vague sadness in his heart. In a patch of thorn scrub he sniffed out a rabbit, but when he sprang for it, it dodged and fled, zigzagging cunningly till he was forced to abandon the chase.

If I'd had a Pack, there would have been another wolf to flank it, block it, drive it back to me.

I'll manage.

The sun was lowering in the sky and his paw pads were beginning to ache when he heard something, somewhere off

to his left: a high, squeaking bark of fear. Wolf came to a halt, hackles rising, ears pricking toward it.

It had been a long time since he'd heard the sound, but he knew a pup bark when he heard it. This one was afraid, very afraid. His brow furrowed. *Another wolf Pack? Where are they?*

For a moment he hesitated. He couldn't dash into the midst of a strange Pack; they'd simply kill him. But if there were other wolves near him, he had to try, at least, to join with them. Nerves fluttered in his belly, his need warring with wariness.

His ears flickered again, and he gave a low, uncertain growl. The pup was still yelping frantically. *Where's its Mother-Wolf? What is she waiting for?*

The pitch of the barking rose, almost to a squeal, and Wolf couldn't repress his instinct any longer. Blood raced to his heart and his belly and he shot forward, sprinting toward the sound of a pup in distress.

Branches slapped his muzzle and thorns snagged in his fur, but he ran on, the sound growing closer and louder. He could barely see where he was going, but now he could scent the pup ahead, its terror sharp in his nostrils. Still there were no sounds or smells of grown wolves, though there was something else. . . .

Plunging through a last belt of thorn-scrub, Wolf skidded to a halt.

And found himself nose-to-nose with an enormous, glossy giantfur.

Its rumbling roar made the ground shake. Wolf backed off swiftly, flattening his ears, as he took in what was happening.

The huge black giantfur shifted on its massive paws, giving him another roar of warning before turning back to its prey. Beneath it, trapped between the roots of an ancient pine, cowered a terrified dog pup.

Rage drove out Wolf’s fear. He lunged forward between the giantfur and the pup, backing against the tree. His legs jammed protectively over the pup, and he wrinkled his muzzle in a furious snarl.

The giantfur blinked and gave its hoarse roar again, making the tree shudder. Between Wolf’s paws, the pup cringed, whimpering.

The giantfur went back on its hindpaws, baring sharp teeth in its small, pointed muzzle. Wolf’s hackles bristled as he snarled back. Lunging forward, he snapped his fangs into its glossy black shoulder, deep enough to find flesh as well as fur.

The giantfur squealed in rage, then swiped enormous pale claws at Wolf. He fell back, but attacked again straightaway, nipping hard at the creature’s neck. Once more he dodged back, slipping out of reach of those lashing claws.

Seeming uncertain now, the giantfur growled, its beady black eyes fixed on Wolf’s. A low rumble came from its throat; then it snapped its teeth again. Wolf held his ground, fangs bared to the gums.

The giantfur’s retreat was sudden and complete. It dropped back to all fours, then turned and shambled into the bushes. Soon its growls faded and all Wolf could hear were the crash and snap of branches.

Wolf heaved a shuddering sigh of relief. Now that it was over, he could admit to himself how rash he’d been. A giantfur was no creature for a wolf to fight, let alone a dog.

He dipped his head quizzically to the pup shivering between his forelegs. “What did you do to annoy it?”

The pup was still shivering, but his huge eyes were bright with amazement and adoration. “That was the *best thing* I have *ever seen.*”

Wolf growled. “That was the stupidest thing you have ever seen. The giantfur could have killed us both. Where’s your Pack?”

At once the pup's face fell. Or maybe it didn't, thought Wolf; maybe the pup's features were constantly sliding down its face. He was an odd-looking little thing, Wolf decided. His paws seemed clumsy and far too big for him, and his face was crumpled, his jaws floppy. Though his sturdy body was golden-brown, his face was black, and there were folds of wrinkled skin above his little black eyes. Maybe that was all that gave him his heavy-eyed, mournful expression.

The pup whimpered miserably. "I haven't got a Pack," he told him.

"What do you mean, you haven't got a Pack?" Wolf lifted his ears in surprise. "Every dog or wolf has a Pack." *Except me,* he reminded himself with a twinge of sadness. "What about your Mother-Dog?"

"My Mother-Dog got sick and died." Miserably the pup lowered his crinkled face to its forepaws. "So did my Sire-Dog. I'm all alone."

Wolf stared at him. A pup this size, left all alone in the forest? With giantfurs and coyotes and mountain sharpclaws? He was doomed.

"What's your name?" Wolf asked him.

"Snail." The pup raised his mournful-pup eyes to his.

Wolf choked on a laugh, and forced his face to look solemn. "I've heard some strange names lately, but *Snail?*"

"I like snails," said the pup dolefully. "They're tasty. And there's not much else around here."

Wolf sat back on his haunches, perplexed. "What are you going to do?"

The pup tilted his ugly crumpled head, fixing his eyes hopefully on Wolf. "I could come with you."

"I don't think so." Wolf shook his head. "I don't have a Pack either. I wouldn't be able to look after you—I've got enough trouble looking after myself at the moment."

The pup wriggled, and crept tighter beneath his belly, so that Wolf had to crane to look down at him.

“But I could look after you,” he whined, nuzzling into Wolf. “I’m quite fast for a pup, even my Sire-Dog said so. We could be a Pack together! I could be your lookout. I could find the prey, and chase it to you, and you can kill it!”

Wolf peered at the little thing, dumbfounded. “I don’t know. . . .”

The pup poked his head out from beneath him, his eyes pleading. “I could find you *lots* of snails.”

Wolf whuffed with laughter, he couldn’t help it. Then he grew thoughtful again. *He’s a pup and he’s helpless. You can’t leave him out here. And snails aren’t* that *bad. . . .*

“I suppose you could come with me for a little while,” he told the pup doubtfully. “Just for a bit, though. And you have to do everything I tell you. No fooling around or disobeying me. And no pestering giantfurs.”

“Yay!” The pup bounced out from beneath his legs, wagging his hindquarters furiously. “I promise, I promise! I’ll be *so good!*”

Oh, Great Wolf, what have I let myself in for? But Wolf couldn’t help a tingle of amusement. “You’d better be.”

“I will!” The pup sat down suddenly, panting. “What’s your name?”

My Name, thought Wolf. *My Name?*

He could say *Wolf,* the last name he’d been given. Or should he say *Dog?* It was the Name his Pack had given him under the full moon, in sight of the Great Wolf; the Name his Mother-Wolf had told him to be proud of.

A breeze stirred the foliage as the pup gazed expectantly up at him. On it, he could smell the mountains, the firs, and the sagebrush.

I don’t have to be either of those things, he realized. *Both my Packs are gone. Maybe it’s time to choose my own identity. Live as myself, and for myself. Find my own friends and family and respect. Protect the wolves and dogs that I want to protect.*

Maybe I can make a Pack of my own.

He felt his spine stiffen with determination. Gazing into Snail’s eager eyes, he drew himself up proudly and gave the pup a wolf grin.

“You can call me Alpha.”

Excerpt from *Survivors #2: A Hidden Enemy*

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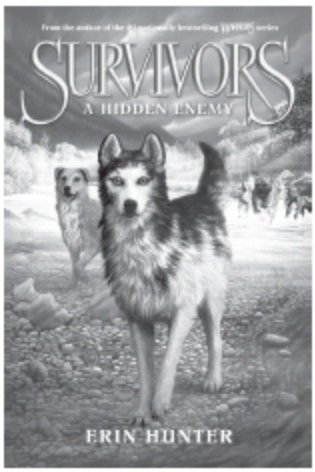
SURVIVORS

BOOK 2:

A HIDDEN ENEMY



Lucky and the Leashed Dogs have finally settled in the forest. But a fierce Pack of Wild Dogs has laid claim to the land—and they are led by a menacing half-wolf Alpha. Read on for a look at their first meeting. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

“Our territory! Ours!”

Birds took off with an alarmed clatter and screech from the treetops, and disturbed leaves fluttered down around Lucky’s paws.

He stood stiff and trembling, gazing back the way he’d come. That was his Pack in the valley—no, not his Pack, but his *friends*. And those ferocious barks told him one thing: They were in terrible danger.

Terrible danger he was not there to help them fight.

Lucky glanced around, torn. Since just after sunup, when he’d left his friends to fend for themselves, he had traveled a long way. He could make out the misty silhouette of the far hills in the distance, and now that he was a good way from the valley he was able to look down on almost the entire forest. Indeed, he’d nearly climbed clear of the trees, and close in front of him was the ridge he’d been heading for. The sight of it had been spurring him on, making his legs run faster and faster—but now he stood as still as a tree.

His friends needed him.

Heart pounding, Lucky bolted back the way he’d come.

Forest-Dog! Don’t let them come to any harm! Let me get there in time. . . .

He raced toward the valley, leaping over fallen branches and scattering leaves. He should have trusted his instincts. Deep down he’d *known* that he was not supposed to leave the Pack. But he had trotted away like a Lone Dog, and now his friends were vulnerable.

Who will protect them if I don’t?

He could still hear the howls of anger, dog voices that he didn’t recognize mingled with the barks of his litter-sister and the rest of the Leashed Dogs.

“Our land, our water! Get out!”

“Everyone together! Stay with me!”

Lucky’s powerful hind legs brought him quickly to the crest of a small hill and he scrabbled to a halt before his momentum could take him plunging down.

Wait, Lucky . . . find out the lay of the land before you dash into trouble.

Lucky’s keen gaze searched the valley below. It opened out into broad and lush meadows beyond the thick woods. It had seemed ideal for the Leashed Dogs. There were places for Mickey to hunt and for Martha to swim, plenty of shelter for Sunshine and Alfie and Daisy, wide ranges for Bruno and Bella to explore. He should have known that other dogs would have had the same idea. Of course another Pack had gotten to the valley before them, and now those dogs were defending their territory.

In the distance, silver light glinted on a smooth expanse of water; farther off and next to the forest’s edge ran the river where he’d last seen the Leashed Dogs. Lucky bounded down the hill, heading toward it.

The hostile Pack’s growls and barks made Lucky’s fur prickle with anger and fear. But he knew if he burst out from the forest in broad daylight he’d be seen at once, so he made himself go carefully.

Something had changed about the river since he’d left his friends there. *A strangeness,* Lucky thought. And then he remembered the streams and pools close to the destroyed city. They had the same scent of danger that Lucky was picking up now.

Horrified, Lucky stopped and stared. There was a nasty green slick on the surface of the water. This was supposed to be a safe haven! The river was supposed to be clean, *pure*—and it had been, or they’d thought so when they found it yesterday.

But now, Lucky could see the deadly stain spreading downriver.

I led my friends to poisoned water!

Was there no getting away from the taint of death that the Big Growl had brought? At this end of the river, even the trees and bushes at the water's edge looked half-dead, shriveled and broken as if a giant dog had chewed on them. As he ran across the hillside parallel to the stream, Lucky's heart felt heavy in his chest. If the Big Growl's sickness could infect even this place, there might be nowhere else for the dogs to go. Nowhere they could be safe.

"Get out!"

A vicious howl split the air, and Lucky heard the panicked yelping of confused dogs and a sharp yip of pain. He raced along and down the hillside, claws skidding on stone. When he broke out of a line of thick scrub, he caught sight of them at last.

His friends looked small and vulnerable against the attacking Pack: a wild-looking band of large dogs, stiff-legged and snarling. Now and again, one would spring forward to give a brutal volley of barks.

"You've got it coming, Leashed Dogs!"

He could hear Bella's voice, too—quieter, more frightened, but still brave: "It's all right, everyone. Stay together. Sunshine, get behind Bruno. Martha, help Daisy."

Skulking low to the ground, crouching in the shadow of a huge boulder, Lucky counted seven dogs in the enemy Pack. Blood surged through his body and he felt a powerful impulse to race right into the battle, but his instincts, learned on the city streets, held him back. He realized with a rush of relief that the fighting had stopped for the moment. The other Pack was just taunting and insulting Bella's Pack—if Lucky raced in now, the situation could become deadly again. The hostile Pack might decide to finish the smaller dogs quickly so they could concentrate on him.

Right now a couple of huge dogs were lunging and snapping at little Sunshine and Daisy, not biting to kill but making them flinch away in terror.

“Keep them off-balance,” some dog said in a low growl. “Spring, watch your side!” One of the Wild Dogs leaped to her right, heading Sunshine off from escape as the small dog scuttled from behind Bruno toward the shelter of some underbrush. Lucky looked around for the dog that had given the orders, but couldn’t see him.

Lucky knew that if any of the bigger Leashed Dogs dashed to Sunshine’s and Daisy’s defense, the rest of the hostile Pack would dart in at their flanks, biting and worrying till the defenders were harried and worn. When it came to the real fight, to claws and teeth and torn skin, Bella and the others would already be exhausted. He’d seen it before, sneaky but efficient, in the brutal bands of dogs he’d tried to avoid in his city days.

He would have to surprise these Wild Dogs, using tactics as cunning and dirty as their own. *Don’t just jump in,* he told himself. *Be as wily as the Forest-Dog.*

In the shadows, Lucky could get much closer before he pounced, so long as he kept downwind. He dodged through the trees, and as he crept from behind a ridge he caught his first sight of the hostile Pack’s leader.

Their Alpha dog.

Huge and gray-furred, he looked lithe and graceful, yet powerful, too. He wasn’t joining the battle, but kept giving his Pack sharp orders.

“Keep at their heels! Teach them nobody invades our territory!” He threw his head back and let out a long, snarling howl.

Lucky felt prickles of fear in his fur, his stomach clenching with foreboding as he crept forward.

That’s no dog. . . .

No wonder the strange Pack’s tactics were as cunning as a wolf’s. Lucky had never seen one of those distant dog-cousins close up, but from vague glimpses and half-remembered tales he recognized the pale eyes, savage teeth, and shaggy fur. And there was no mistaking that

vicious howl; Lucky had heard something like it once, a long time ago. A memory rippled through his body—a memory not of something seen, but something *heard*.

This powerful gray dog must be half wolf! Lucky had heard of such dogs, but had never met one.

There were another two dogs keeping their eyes trained on the larger Leashed Dogs, though they occasionally looked to their leader and whined for his instructions. Lucky guessed they were directly below the dog-wolf in the strict Wild Pack hierarchy. One was a huge dark-furred dog with a brutally strong neck and mighty jaws. He was watching Martha carefully, but though she was the biggest of the Leashed Dogs, Lucky could see she was already limping on one leg, leaving bloody paw prints when she tried to get out of his way.

The other Wild Dog was a far thinner swift-dog who dodged and circled the fight, moving so fast Lucky's eyes could barely follow her, snapping out orders with a brisk efficiency. She was smaller than the dark-furred dog and fragile-looking, but she seemed very much in command of her underlings.

Maybe it was only her shape and coloring, but Lucky couldn't help being painfully reminded of Sweet, who had escaped with him from the Trap House when all their fellow captive dogs had died.

But this dog didn't have Sweet's good temper. Whoever she was, she would make crow's meat of the Leashed Dogs if her Alpha gave the order to charge.

Forest-Dog, I need all your skill and cunning. . . .

Lucky stalked forward, muscles bunched and tense, still careful to stay safely downwind. He was within a few dog-lengths of the fight now, and they hadn't scented him yet. If he could give them enough of a shock, the Leashed Dogs might have time to get away—yes, just a swift run and a sudden spring . . .

Then he froze again, one paw raised. Not five long-strides away, a small deep-chested dog had hurtled through the scuffle. Lucky's breath stopped in his throat.

Alfie!

The young Leashed Dog skidded to a halt right in front of the huge Alpha. His trembling hindquarters betrayed his fear, but his hackles were up and his lips were drawn back in a defiant snarl. The dog-wolf stared at Alfie, his head cocked as the smaller dog unleashed a volley of furious barks.

"You let us go! Let my friends go! Who says this is your land?"

For a moment, the Alpha seemed to waver between contempt and amusement.

Alfie continued his brave barking, his head whipping from side to side, as though he hoped the extra movement would make him look bigger, more threatening. "We're only looking for clean water—you attacked us! You're bad dogs!" Then his gaze fell between the straggly trees, and his eyes met Lucky's. Alfie seemed to swell to twice his size with happiness, renewed courage making his barks louder and more threatening. Lucky could almost hear the thoughts racing through the smaller dog's head.

Lucky's back. . . . Now we'll be fine. . . . We'll win this fight!

Lucky felt a fierce trembling in his flanks as he realized that he had given Alfie the courage to believe that he could stand up to the dog-wolf.

Alfie wrinkled his muzzle, baring his teeth at his massive enemy.

No!

Lucky's muscles bunched to spring forward, but it was too late. Alfie had flung himself at the huge dog-wolf. The Alpha barely moved. A single swipe of one massive paw slammed the brave Leashed Dog to the ground. Alfie rolled

over once, and stopped, lying stunned and still. Blood spilled from a massive tear in his side.

Lucky stumbled to a halt. He wanted to howl with rage and anguish. If his friend hadn't seen him, he surely would never have had the nerve to charge at the half wolf.

Why did you have to see me, Alfie? Why—

Lucky's fur and skin prickled as the ground started shaking beneath his paws. It was as though the Earth-Dog shared Lucky's anger.

Then—*wham!*—Lucky was thrown forward, stumbling as the whole world shook again. He hit the ground and tumbled, but managed to jump back onto all four paws, his entire body trembling.

Another Big Growl!?

The fighting stopped as every dog crouched low, steadying himself. The Wild Pack all looked to their Alpha, who braced his legs against the trembling earth for a second before letting out a chilling howl.

"It's happening again! Pack, to me!"

A tree right beside Lucky creaked and groaned and started to fall. Lucky scrambled out of its path just before it slammed into the solid rock of the hillside and started rolling across the ground that was splitting apart at Lucky's paws. Soon, the air was filled with the shrieks of tortured wood as more and more trees fell, hitting the rocks with crashes that sounded like thunder.

Lucky fled in a panic, not knowing or caring what direction he was taking.

All that mattered was getting away from the Growl.

But the Growl was everywhere, above and around him. The whole earth seemed to slide treacherously beneath his paws. *No, not again! Don't let the Growl ruin this place too. . . .*

As he bolted, Lucky glanced back to see that the other dogs, both Wild and Leashed, were also fleeing in blind terror. The shuddering earth split, a wound tearing itself

down the center of the valley. A bundle of pale fur was a blur at the edge of his vision. Someone was falling into the crack. Lucky snapped his head away and veered to the right, afraid to see the death of any dog. He spotted Mickey and Bruno struggling to drag Alfie's limp form toward shelter, and Martha limping painfully away from the crashing trees.

My Pack!

Instinct spurred him to run after them, but it was too late. Above him another gigantic tree was creaking and cracking, its roots lifting from the dirt as if it were trying to pull itself free.

Lucky leaped off the clod of earth and roots, tumbling awkwardly to the ground, and a jolt of pain went through his foreleg. For a moment, he couldn't move. But when he looked up and saw the great tree swaying, falling back into place, he thought he was safe—until the shifting ground heaved again, and the great tree toppled toward him.

Terror ripped through Lucky's bones as he lay on his side and stared up at the massive shuddering trunk, his brain rattled by the tree's tortured shriek of death.

He rolled onto his paws, trying to crawl away on his belly.

But there was no escape.

Earth-Dog wants me. . . . thought Lucky, as he heard the mighty tree falling. *I'm not going to get away this time.*

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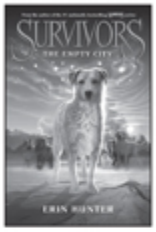

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ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling Warriors and Seekers series. Visit her online at www.survivorsdogs.com.

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